

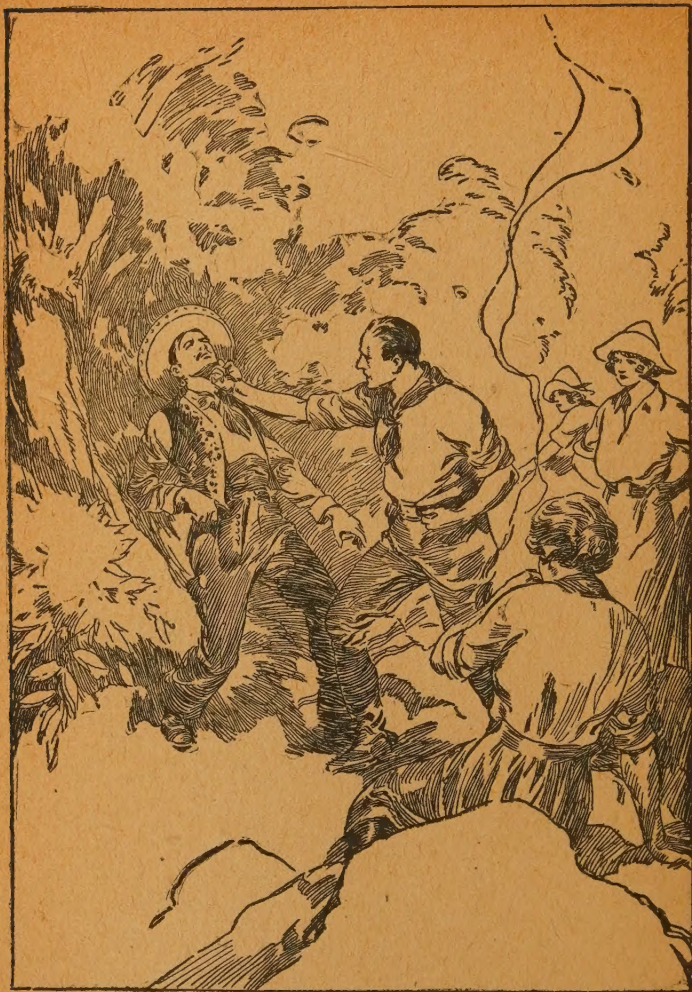
GRACE HARLOWE'S
OVERLAND RIDERS AND THE
BORDER GUERRILLAS



JESSIE
GRAHAM
FLOWER, A.M.

254





"Pardon, Señor!" Mocked Hippy.

Frontispiece.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders Among the Border Guerrillas

By

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Author of The High School Girls Series, The College Girls Series, The
Grace Harlowe Overseas Series, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
on the Old Apache Trail, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on
the Great American Desert, Grace Harlowe's Overland
Riders Among the Kentucky Mountaineers, Grace Har-
lowe's Overland Riders in the Great North Woods,
Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the High
Sierras, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
in the Yellowstone National Park,
Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
in the Black Hills, Grace Har-
lowe's Overland Riders
at Circle O Ranch,
etc., etc.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I—A REAL SURPRISE PARTY.....	11
Grace Harlowe has a happy secret. Yvonne discusses mice. Why Emma Dean ran down a policeman. The reunion at Haven Home. Arline Thayer takes Emma by surprise. The Overlanders are warned that trouble awaits them in the mountains. Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson makes a hit.	
CHAPTER II—ON THE LONG TRAIL.....	26
A mule that had no name. Their first tragedy. In camp on the desert. Grace and Hippy read disturbing signs in the skies. "Plains storms are frightful things." Lemuel "breathes in harmony," but doesn't know it. The Overland camp is attacked. Overwhelmed by a desert sand storm.	
CHAPTER III—LEMUEL SAVES HIS HAT.....	38
Stacy Brown has his usual luck. Overland girls nearly suffocated by the drifting sands. The little guide reckons that he is "daid." "I'se shot!" Ponies are lost in the storm. An attacker's mount is found shot. Señor Gonzales pays the Overland camp a visit. Lieutenant Wingate resents an insult with a blow.	
CHAPTER IV—CALLERS DROP IN.....	50
"Get his guns!" cries Grace. "For this you shall die!" threatens the Mexican dandy. Hippy hears the <i>spang</i> of a bullet. A visitor who was welcome. The stranger's face undergoes a sudden change and his hand drops to his weapon. The Overland camp thrown into sudden turmoil.	

CHAPTER V—THE UNINVITED GUEST.....58

"Lemuel has been hurt." Arline has a sudden collapse. Stacy gets the worst of his argument with Miss Dean. Prowlers disturb Lieutenant Wingate. The Overlanders' sentry goes to sleep at his post. A mysterious message from "Willy." Stacy awakens to find a stranger asleep beside him.

CHAPTER VI—STACY MAKES A CAPTURE.....69

"You keep still or it will be the worse for you." The stranger sniffs at the fat boy's weapon. "Crazy" Bill Belden introduces himself. The laugh is turned on Stacy. Emma Dean defines "dirt." The magician of the cook fire. "I smell smoke!" A bullet goes through Bill Belden's coffee pot.

CHAPTER VII—VOICES OF THE NIGHT.....79

Overland Riders hastily seek cover. Rage takes away the mountaineer's appetite. Emma advises him to breathe in harmony. Rifle signals are heard in the hills. The cry of a "banshee." "Keep yer hands away from yer guns!" commands a stern voice.

CHAPTER VIII—CRAZY BILL WAKES UP.....87

The Mexican dandy makes a demand for money. Pat Proll shows his teeth. "As an officer of the law it is my duty to arrest you!" the deputy sheriff informs the Overlanders. Crazy Bill passes the lie! Bullets find human marks in the Overland camp.

CHAPTER IX—THE FLIGHT.....96

Riding away from trouble. The mountaineer is suddenly missing. Disaster follows a daytime nap. Lemuel disappears. The search. Hippy strikes a hot trail and calls his companions to look at it. A shocking discovery.

CHAPTER X—DISASTERS COME FAST.....108

The little guide beaten and carried away. Hippy takes the trail armed for trouble. The trailer fails to return. Overlanders guard their camp. Stacy's health will not permit his working before or after meals. "Stop! You're shooting at me, you idiot!" yells Tom Gray.

CHAPTER XI—A MESSAGE FROM "WILLY".....116

Stacy makes an alarming discovery. "Stacy has been shooting at shadows." A hat that yielded a mystery. "The fat boy's bullets are trained bullets," avers Emma Dean. A bullet puts a sudden end to the Overland investigation.

CHAPTER XII—A NARROW ESCAPE.....122

"Doan' shoot. Ah ain't done nothin'," wails St. Petersburg Johnson. Lemuel tells the story of his captivity. Tom Gray goes in search of Hippy. A night of anxiety. Overland girls keep a ceaseless vigil. Grace makes a startling discovery.

CHAPTER XIII—JUANA, THE MYSTERIOUS.....131

The Overland girls respond to an alarm. "Girls, there is someone in that tent," announces Grace Harlowe impressively. The intruder is dragged out. Overlanders meet with a great surprise. "Look out! Juana has run away!" A smothered scream answers the Overland hail.

CHAPTER XIV—HIPPIY FINDS A HOT TRAIL.....140

The duel in the mesquite. The Overlander is laid low by a blow. Lieutenant Wingate has an unhappy awakening. Captors taunt their victim. Hippy is fed by brute strength. A Mexican comes to grief. "Señor, for that you die!"

	PAGE
CHAPTER XV—A VOICE FROM THE SHADOWS.....	149
Lieutenant Wingate faces sudden death. On the renegades' trail. Rescued by a mysterious stranger. The flight from the guerrillas. Hippy hails the wrong man. A blow and a shot. "There's a man on that animal!" A discovery that thrilled.	
CHAPTER XVI—A WARNING THAT WAS HEEDED.....	159
"Spread out and be ready for trouble!" Arline is found a crumpled heap. A stranger by the campfire. Bill Belden makes himself at home. Another mysterious message. The attack on the camp is on. "I got him! Look out for yourselves," shouts Stacy Brown.	
CHAPTER XVII—ON A SECRET MISSION.....	168
Tom and Hippy flee from the border guerrillas. Bud leads the way. In the secret rendezvous of the Texas Rangers. Overland Riders join the Ranger band. Tom and Hippy hear a thrilling message. "Flash the alarm!"	
CHAPTER XVIII—THE AMBUSH.....	179
"For goodness' sake, back up!" The Overland girls consult in the face of peril. Mysterious figures seen skulking in the shadows. The girls seek a hiding place. "We are surrounded on all sides," whispers Grace Harlowe.	
CHAPTER XIX—RANGERS TAKE A HAND.....	187
A new note in Two-Mile Pass. "I'm hit!" cries Arline Thayer. Ambushers put to rout. "We're saved! We're saved!" Overlanders flee for safety. "The Rangers have them now."	

CONTENTS

9

PAGE

CHAPTER XX—A SURPRISE AT EL CAPITAN.....193

Tit for tat, and the Ranger is it. A mystery found at El Capitan Rock. Humans first, mules next. Lemuel shouts a warning. The Overlanders are accused of being horse thieves. "Keep your hands away from your guns!" warns a voice from the bush.

CHAPTER XXI—CONCLUSION.....203

The posse rides away. St. Petersburg Johnson makes a "discovery." Strange doings in the Guadalupe. Startled by a voice from the mesquite. Bullets whistle over the Overland position. Help comes at last.

GRACE HARLOWE'S OVER- LAND RIDERS AMONG THE BORDER GUERRILLAS

CHAPTER I

A REAL SURPRISE PARTY

“**T**HERE they are! Remember, Yvonne, don't you dare give away our secret,” warned Grace Harlowe as the honk-honk of Tom Gray's auto horn told her that their expected guests had arrived at Haven Home.

Grace, her face flushed with excitement and happy anticipation, ran out to greet the girls of the Overland outfit. She was followed by Yvonne on dancing feet.

“Girls! Girls! Is it really you?” cried Grace.

“Yes, what is left of us,” gasped Emma Dean, and a moment later the arms of Emma, Nora Wingate and Elfreda Briggs were hugging Grace delightedly.

"Don't, don't! Don't smother me, I beg of you," protested the mistress of Haven Home as she released herself from the enthusiastic mauling of her friends.

"Here, here! Am I to be entirely left out?" demanded Hippy Wingate, stepping forward.

"Indeed not. You may shake hands with me," answered Grace, extending her hand in warm, friendly greeting. "I am glad to see—"

"Yvonne! Oh, you dear!" It was Elfreda Briggs' voice heard above the chatter and the laughter as she ran to the golden-haired girl that Grace had adopted in France. "Let me look at you. How you have grown! How different you are from the little girl that Grace found that terrible night when the big guns were hurling steel into your deserted home city. What has become of the yellow cat that she found with you?"

"Kitty is well, but she is so very fat that she no longer cares for mice, even for dessert. *Ma Mere* says that Yvonne has spoiled her with too much sweets. Mademoiselle Briggs, were you a kitty would you eat mice?"

Miss Briggs' reply was lost in the shout of laughter that followed Yvonne's naïve question, and further discussion of mice was avoided when Grace led her guests into the

house, where a fresh outburst of chatter instantly began.

“Grace, never, never again will I ride with that husband of yours. He is the most reckless driver I ever saw, and I count myself most fortunate that I am alive,” declared Emma.

“Why—”

“Reckless?” cried Elfreda. “When compared with you, Emma, he is a procession. I’ll tell you people a story about Emma. This spring she was driving her uncle’s car in Boston, and ran down a traffic policeman, knocked him down and rolled him over into the gutter.”

“Oh, Emma!” cried the other girls in chorus.

“The policeman got up, covered with dirt, red of face, and, in the language of the street, was ‘red-headed.’ He gave her an awful calling down and ended by demanding, ‘What was you trying to do, anyway?’ ‘Why, I—I think I was trying to get one of your brass buttons for a hat pin,’ answered Emma idiotically, whereupon the traffic man told her to go on before he changed his mind and arrested her. Now what do you think of that, folks?” finished Miss Briggs.

What they thought was expressed in a gale of laughter.

"I think you are real mean. I wasn't driving more than twelve miles an hour," protested Emma indignantly.

"That is what they all say," observed Tom Gray.

"Where is Stacy Brown? Isn't he to accompany us on our trip this summer?" questioned Elfreda.

"Oh, yes. The party would not be complete without that irrepressible young man," answered Tom laughingly. "Stacy will join us at New Orleans and—"

"New Orleans?" Miss Briggs raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"I suppose we might as well tell you," interjected Grace. "We have decided to ride in Texas this season. We understand that there are some interesting experiences to be had there, especially in the Guadalupe Mountains. Hippy has arranged for ponies for us, so we are not going to take our own, as I have already written to you."

"What do you mean by 'interesting experiences'?" questioned Emma, regarding Grace narrowly. "Bandits, and then more bandits?"

"Oh, no; not necessarily. Rough country, new scenes, and perhaps here and there an interesting local character."

"Help!" murmured Emma. "The trouble

with your interesting characters is that they are so frightfully interesting that one's life isn't safe in the same county with them. Grace, Hippy is famished. Don't we get anything to eat in this hospitable home?"

"Thank you," bowed Lieutenant Hippy Wingate.

"You shall be fed, children. First, I have a little surprise for you," Grace informed them. "I wish I might delay it a little longer, for I do so enjoy the anticipation of your surprise. You may come in now, dear," she called, addressing someone in an adjoining room.

The portieres parted and a fair-haired, blue-eyed young woman stood revealed between them. The Overlanders looked, then gasped.

"A-r-l-i-n-e T-h-a-y-er!" breathed Elfreda Briggs.

"Daffydowndilly!" cried Emma Dean, springing up and running to her.

"Well, well, if it isn't our buddy of the World War," wondered Hippy as the Overlanders fairly swept Arline from her feet in the exuberance of their greeting.

Arline had been the chum of Grace, Emma and Elfreda at Overton College, and later served with the Overton Unit in France. She was an old friend, and a much-loved one. Following the war, Arline had become a settle-

ment worker, and the experience had matured her even more than had her service in France during the strenuous days of the great conflict. Emma, after regarding the young woman for a few moments, declared that she was as perfect a type of an old maid as she had ever seen. With that they started for the dining room, but Arline halted them, saying that she wished to ask Emma a question.

"My dear girl, do you breathe in harmony?" questioned Arline, placing a hand on Emma's sleeve.

"I—why, what do you mean?" stammered Miss Dean.

"Do you breathe and live in harmony with the universe—does your soul give sweetness to all persons in the world and—"

For once Emma was confused, the more so because of the chorus of chuckles and laughter that interrupted Arline's questions.

"No, I don't," retorted Emma with considerable irritation. "Do you?"

"I try to, but I am merely a novice in this wonderful New Thought that is rapidly drawing the attention of the—"

"Let's go," urged Miss Briggs.

"Yes," agreed Hippy. "The best of all new thoughts I can think of is that dinner is served."

The party went on to the dining room, Emma elevating her pugnacious little nose a little higher than usual. Many an amused glance was directed at her during the meal, because for once, Emma appeared to be at a loss for words to express what she felt. Perhaps the merry twinkle in Grace Harlowe's eyes also had something to do with Emma's disturbed state, for she was fully as keen an observer as Grace herself.

It was a merry party, just the same, and dinner was followed by a happy evening, during which much of the conversation related to the plans for their journey which was to begin on the morrow. Yvonne, who was to spend the summer with Grace's relatives, retired early, after bidding good-bye to the guests. When the evening came to an end, and the Overland Riders rose to go to their rooms, Arline once again approached Emma.

"Remember, dear," she said, "to breathe in harmony. Permit no inharmonious thought to enter your mind."

"Thank you, Daffydowndilly, and see to it that you apply that advice to yourself," retorted Emma, whereupon she flaunted off to bed.

In the confusion incidental to the departure next morning, Emma heard no more of

“breathing in harmony,” but later in the day, after the party had entrained for the South, Arline again turned her attention to the little freckle-faced Overlander, and in the succeeding days of their journey Emma had little respite from Arline, but Emma observed that she was the only one of the party on whom Arline inflicted her hobby.

When they reached New Orleans, where they spent a couple of days while waiting for Stacy Brown to join the party, Emma kept away from her companions as much as possible, and devoted considerable time to pondering over Arline’s nagging. By the time Stacy joined them, she had arrived at certain definite conclusions, which became confirmed ere they reached their final destination.

Carlos, a little Texas desert town, blazing hot in the spring sunshine, was the point at which they detrained on the morning of the second day after leaving New Orleans. It was Carlos from which they were to begin this summer’s outing in the saddle, a town that was not attractive to the eye for its beauty or for the appearance of its inhabitants.

“A bunch of rough-necks,” observed Stacy Brown after looking over the throng of cowboys and Mexican *vaqueros* assembled to meet the train that morning.

"This doesn't look at all promising," observed Miss Briggs. "Arline, do you like it?"

"Like it? I like everything, the wide open spaces and smiling nature. I love everything because everything is beautiful. Who couldn't breathe in harmony here? Girls, this is life and I want to live it—life unfettered by either conventions or brick walls—I want experience, adventure," finished Arline dramatically.

"Huh!" grunted Stacy Brown.

"You'll get it," promised Emma Dean a little maliciously.

"Judging from past experiences with the Overland Riders in our journeys on the Old Apache Trail, across the Great American Desert, and on many a mountain trail, your fond wish, Arline, is parent to the reality. Life is coming your way and coming fast," averred Elfreda Briggs.

While this conversation was being carried on at the railroad station, Hippy Wingate was inquiring for the man of whom they were to hire ponies for the journey across the plains and through the mountains. He found the man in the person of Tom Bainbridge, an American rancher who affected the dress of the Mexican *vaquero* or cowboy. Hippy introduced him to the others of the party and the rancher swept off his sombrero in acknowledgment.

"You don't mean to tell me that these young women are goin' into the mountains, do you?" he asked.

Hippy nodded.

"It ain't safe. The guerrillas are makin' things hot all the way between the border and the hills. What it's all about we don't know, but we do know there's goin' to be trouble unless the government takes a hand and chases the ruffians out. Better hit the trail to the north," suggested the rancher.

"Isn't that perfectly lovely?" cried Emma. "How you will love it, Arline darling. You will show the guerrillas how to breathe in harmony, won't you? Oh, I'm so glad!"

"Guer-rillas!" stammered Arline. "What are they?"

"Greasers mostly, Miss," Bainbridge informed her. "Half-breed Mexicans, *vaqueros*, renegade whites and the like."

Arline's face lost some of its color, then she laughed.

"I know. You people are trying to frighten me. I am not afraid," she said, assuming a courage that she plainly did not feel.

Emma Dean was delighted, nor was her delight lost on the other members of the Overland outfit.

Hippy soon after that went away with the

rancher to look over the ponies. Bainbridge said he had a colored boy in his employ who would do for a guide and handy man, and who was useful around horses, as well as possessing familiarity with most of the country over which the Overlanders proposed to ride. He also said that he would fetch the boy back with him for their inspection.

While Hippy was absent, Tom and Stacy assembled their belongings and arranged them in packs. In the meantime the Overland girls made their coffee in the open, fried bacon at the end of a sharp stick, and ate their breakfast sitting on a pile of railroad ties beside the tracks, observed by pretty much all the inhabitants of the village.

Nearly two hours had elapsed when Hippy and Bainbridge returned, and with them the colored boy that the rancher had recommended. He was quite the blackest black that the Overland Riders had ever seen, the blackness of his face being sharply accentuated by ivory-white teeth that were at all times prominently in evidence.

“Emma, I’ll bet you’d give a million dollars to have teeth like that,” suggested Stacy.

“You lose, Stacy. I haven’t so much money. What is his name?” she asked, turning to Hippy

Hippy Wingate said that he hadn't asked. "Here, boy, what is your name?"

"Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson, sah," was the response that brought a laugh from the Overlanders.

"Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson," reflected Emma. "Lemuel, why didn't your parents give you a long name while they were about it?"

"Ah reckons it wuz 'cause they wuz too pooah to gib me er longah one," answered the black boy, showing the whites of his eyes as he rolled them from one to another of his audience.

This time the merriment was more boisterous than ever, and the rancher joined in it in a series of explosive roars.

"I reckon that answer will hold you for a while, Emma Dean," cried Hippy, noting her flushed face and the unspoken retort framed on Miss Dean's lips.

"Breathe in harmony and all will be sunshine within," whispered Arline Thayer, which remark did not serve to lessen the little Overland Rider's irritation, but she restrained herself. It was the first journey of the Riders on which Emma did not have a hobby of her own which she rode to the undoing of her companions from the beginning of the season to the

end. Now Arline Thayer had stepped in with a hobby of *her* own and Emma's nose was "out of joint."

As Emma pondered over the situation, the other girls were questioning Lemuel as to his accomplishments. He declared that he could cook, guide, ride and sing. Tom was engaged in earnest conversation with the rancher from whom they had hired ponies, discussing trails and international conditions on the Rio Grande, and the Overlander was not a little disturbed over the rancher's expressed opinion that another Mexican revolution was brewing. Tom Gray learned that a few scattered raids already had been made on ranches on the American side of the Rio Grande, and he would have been in favor of seeking other fields for their summer outing were it not that he was there on an official mission for the government to survey forestry conditions in the southwestern part of the State of Texas.

In the meantime the girls had found themselves amusedly interested in Lemuel, and Grace announced that they were eager to take him with them, promising, as he did, much entertainment for the Overland Riders.

"What emolument do you desire, Mr. St. Petersburg?" demanded Hippy ponderously.

Lemuel rolled his eyes.

"Wha—wha dat?" he stammered.

"Mr. Wingate wants to know what wages you want," interpreted Grace.

The boy said he must have five dollars a week, which was much less than they had been accustomed to paying their guides on previous outings.

"Then, provided there are no objections, Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson will be signed up as the general factotum of this bunch of rough riders," announced Hippy. "If there are objections, voice them now or forever hold your peace."

No one answered.

"Any further questions?" persisted Hippy.

"Yes. I have," spoke up Emma. "While I have no objections to offer to hiring the boy with the ivory teeth, I am somewhat in doubt as to one important factor. Were he to fail to measure up to that, it surely would mean a tragedy, at least to one member of our party."

"Oh, Emma!" begged Nora, starting towards her.

Miss Dean waved her aside, and, stepping forward, placed a hand on the colored boy's shoulder.

"Lemuel St. Petersburg," she began in an impressive tone of voice, "I am about to ask you a question that may mean life or death to

you—to all of us. Think well before you answer. Lemuel, I would ask you, do you breathe in harmony? Is your soul in tune with the universe?"

"Wha—wha—wha— Ah doan—" The further reply of the ebony-faced guide was lost in the gales of laughter that swept over the party of Overland Riders.

Emma Dean had turned the tables on her tormentor.

CHAPTER II

ON THE LONG TRAIL

LEMUEL was engaged on the spot, and when the mustangs from Bainbridge's ranch were brought up the interest of the Overlanders was centered on them.

The mustangs were lean and scrubby, ill-natured looking animals, but they plainly were tough and equal to the work for which they had been hired. A pack mule was a part of the stock equipment, and this animal was to be Lemuel's especial charge.

Arline eyed the mustangs with some apprehension.

"Do you ride?" Nora asked her.

"Oh, yes," answered Miss Thayer with more confidence than she felt. "I have ridden much, though not for some time, but you know riding is like swimming—one never forgets it."

"This is a ride that you will be glad to forget," observed Stacy Brown.

"Choose your partners," called Hippy.

The girls selected their mounts. Then came the saddling, which was the test of the disposi-

tion of the animals. Some kicked and squealed and bucked and fought, but the Overland Riders were not disturbed. They had had experience with unruly ponies on other occasions. The most docile mustang of the lot was assigned to Arline Thayer; then packs were lashed to the pack mule while Lemuel went home to get his equipment for the journey. The start was to be made at once, as the Overlanders were eager to be on their way. When Lemuel returned his appearance brought a shout of laughter.

Lemuel had put on a battered plug hat, and a bright yellow tie decorated his soiled collar. His trousers reached to the knees and his feet were bare. The boy showed his gleaming teeth in a smile of satisfaction over his appearance.

"Take that thing off!" commanded Hippy. "Get a hat or go bareheaded."

"Please, please, Hippy. Don't!" begged Emma. "I just adore style, and St. Petersburg surely is a glass of fashion."

"I shouldn't worry about a mere hat," spoke up Miss Briggs. "It will not last long."

The girls all sided with their little guide, and Lemuel's adornment was saved for the time being. He promptly clambered to the back of the pack mule and perched himself precariously on top of the packs.

"How fast can that bundle of bones travel?" demanded Stacy, surveying the thin mule doubtfully.

" 'Bout er mile er minute, Ah reckons, Boss. Dat aire mule got reg'lar angel feet. Dey don't touch de ground 'cept when he wants ter land."

"Yes. We have had experience with that kind of mule before," observed Miss Briggs. "Are we ready to start?"

The Overlanders regarded Arline with considerable interest as she took to her saddle, which she did in a manner that showed her to be measurably familiar with mounting properly. She was a little timid at first, and settled herself in the saddle as though she feared to throw her whole weight on it. The mustang, however, behaved very well. The others then swung into their saddles, and Tom Gray consulted his government map and took an observation of the general direction in which they wished to travel.

"Better not stir up anything with Carlos Gonzales, should you chance to meet him," advised Bainbridge in a low tone to Hippy Wingate.

"Who is Gonzales?" questioned the Overlander.

"A Mexican rancher down in the foothills,

and a bad one, so they say. You haven't told anybody where you are going or that Mr. Gray is a government man, have you?"

Hippy shook his head.

"Anyone is welcome to know who and what we are and what our purpose is. We have no reason for concealment," answered Hippy. Then he thanked the rancher for his warning. "All ready, folks. Lemuel, see that you keep up with us. We'll see what that mule can do. By the way, what is the beast's name?"

"Ain't got no name. Jest mule, dat's all."

The Riders, waving their good-byes to the rancher and the villagers, rode away laughing. It was observed that Arline bounced in her saddle more than she should, and she was urged to sit tighter. In the meantime, Lemuel's mule surprised all hands by settling down into a pacing lope that enabled him to keep well up with the mustangs. In fact, the boy appeared to be having difficulty in keeping the mule from outdistancing the other animals. This was a favorable beginning, meaning that the Overland Riders would not be obliged to halt at frequent intervals to enable their pack animal to catch up with them.

Soon the first tragedy occurred. Arline's pony stumbled. Taken unawares, Miss Thayer plunged headlong, landing in a cloud of dust.

"Arline!" cried Nora, reining in and springing down. "Are you hurt?"

"I—I don't know. I think I am. Oh, this is terrible." Arline was covered with dust, and her body was limp.

"Breathe in harmony and you will be all right in a moment," urged Emma solicitously.

The girls laughed in spite of their sympathy for Arline, who was quickly assisted to her feet and brushed off, then helped up onto her saddle.

"I thought you could ride a horse," growled Hippy.

"I can, but I know I never shall be able to get used to the gait of this peculiar animal," complained Miss Thayer. "Don't we rest at all?"

Grace told her that they were looking for a water hole, and that when one was found they would halt for a rest and a bite to eat. Lemuel seemed to know no more about water holes than they did, and after a futile search they decided to stop for luncheon and to use water from their own canteens, giving the ponies sips from that slender supply.

The ponies were far from being pleased with the meager quantity of water doled out to them, which did little more than moisten their lips. The Overlanders ate a "cold" luncheon as

they walked about because the ground was too hot to sit upon.

On beyond in the blue haze, cool and inviting, were seen the broken mountain ranges of the Texas southwest, many lone peaks rising majestically out of the haze and outlined clearly against the sky. These mountains and peaks, however, now appeared to be fully as far away as when first discovered by the Overland Riders earlier in the day. This same phenomenon had been observed by the Overlanders on other journeys, but to Arline it was new and puzzling. The desert that lay between them and their destination, too, presented a scene that gave her a strange feeling of uneasiness that she was unable to analyze. To Arline Thayer it was a scene of desolation, of sand and sage, cactus and heat, and of terrifying silence. Even the greens of sage and cactus had clothed themselves in the cheerless gray of the desert, a desert of shifting sands, blazing heat and frequent windstorms.

After a brief halt the journey was resumed, greatly to her relief. The riders continued on until late in the afternoon when Tom Gray found a water hole. Lemuel, whose duty it was to be on the lookout for water, had been too busy singing and scolding the mule. Arline had to be assisted from her saddle, as she

was exhausted when they halted to make camp for the night. Her companions made her as comfortable as possible while Lemuel was gathering greasewood sticks for the cook fire.

"Tenderfeet ought to stay at home," declared Stacy, frowningly observing Arline.

"You are here, aren't you?" retorted Emma rebukingly.

Stacy grunted and walked away.

In the meantime, Grace had been observing the skies. Finally, she beckoned to Tom and Hippy to join her.

"Have you noticed the skies, Hippy?" she asked.

"Yes, for the last two hours."

"What's the matter with them?" demanded Tom Gray. "I think them beautiful."

"The matter is that they are far from beautiful in their purpose this evening," responded Grace. "They are threatening. You were not with us on our trip across the Great American Desert, Tom, so of course you do not know how to read the signs here."

"That's right, Tom," confirmed Hippy. "That glassy yellow that you see, indicates a wind storm. We may or we may not get it, but I reckon that it would be wise to be prepared for it. Eh, Grace?"

Grace Harlowe nodded.

"You see?" she questioned, regarding her husband smilingly. "It is my suggestion that we prepare for a blow, take our blankets out of the packs and relash the packs. These storms are frightful things. We encountered one when crossing the Great American Desert, and it nearly wiped us off the earth."

Tom, however, still persisted that they were needlessly alarmed, but deferred to their judgment. Supper was served soon after that. Arline sat down with them. Her face was pale and she was plainly worn out, but held herself up pluckily and forced herself to eat. When she was told that the tents would not be set up that night, but that she must sleep between two blankets on the ground, she was overcome.

"Oh, why did I ever come?" she moaned.

"Because you thought you knew how to breathe in harmony," retorted Emma. "My dear, if you really will breathe in harmony all will be well with you. You must, however, first learn to do it. First, banish every unpleasant thought; breathe slowly and rhythmically, and, as you inhale, repeat to yourself, 'I am Harmony,' until your whole body glows and your nerves tingle, and then you will *know* that you are harmonious, and you will radiate the spirit of harmony, and the world will appear bright and beautiful even though it's storming

like sixty. Come here, St. Petersburg." Emma's order was lost in a peal of merriment.

"That isn't kind of you, Emma," rebuked Nora Wingate.

"Ask Grace whether or not it is," flung back Emma. "Lemuel, are you well and strong and vital?" she demanded, fixing her gaze on him.

"Ah reckon as Ah be, Missie."

"Have you health, strength, happiness and prosperity?"

"Ah, Ah reckon as Ah be."

"You radiate radiance to all about you, don't you?"

Lemuel stammered, gulped and replied that he didn't know.

"But you breathe in harmony, don't you?"

"Ah doan' know, Missie."

"You see, Arline and Grace. He breathes in harmony and doesn't know it. Isn't that infinitely better than thinking that you breathe in harmony, but don't? St. Petersburg, how old are you?" continued Emma without giving their guide an opportunity to reply.

"Ah doan' know, Missie."

"You don't know. Don't you know when you were born?"

Lemuel shook his head.

"Ah doan' reckons as Ah do. Ah was nevah borned."

“What?” demanded the Overlanders in amazement, for there could be no doubt about the boy’s being in earnest.

“How is that?” demanded Emma.

“Ah wasn’t borned—Ah had er step-mother.”

Arline joined in the laughter that followed, though Emma did not.

“Emma, I think that ought to subdue you for a time,” chuckled Hippy.

“As a lawyer, a legal light, I declare the argument closed,” announced J. Elfreda Briggs in her most judicial voice. “And, by the way, the wind is rising, so I think I shall turn in and try to get some sleep before it gets worse. Besides, I am saddle weary.”

Not all of the Overland Riders went to sleep. A few of them lay resting, but wide awake, listening to the fitful sighs of the wind, and to the occasional puffs of air that sent little eddies of dust spiralling upwards. A new sound suddenly put at least two pairs of ears on the instant alert. This was a distant patting sound, as if someone were patting on a thick carpet with both hands. The sound seemed to be drawing nearer.

“Tom!” called Hippy, who lay a few paces from him with feet towards the flickering embers of the campfire.

"I hear it. Horses!" replied Tom Gray.

"Yes. And they are coming fast. I reckon they are trying to make the foothills before the storm breaks."

"They are heading this way, Hippy, and I don't like it," announced Tom, rising on one elbow and listening. Both men instinctively reached for their rifles which lay near them.

"Better lie down and pretend to be asleep," advised Hippy.

Two pairs of eyes observed the movements of the two men, Grace Harlowe's and Elfreda Briggs', but neither girl spoke.

"They are coming!" warned Tom.

Barely had the words passed his lips when the shadowy outlines of a body of horsemen swept into view bearing down on the camp. As they neared it they swerved just enough to clear it. Emma heard and sprang to her feet.

"Lie down!" cried Grace. "Everyone keep down flat."

The *spang, spang, spang* of rifle bullets over the heads of the Overlanders made unnecessary further commands to lie flat.

The horsemen swept past, and as they cleared the camp, they turned in their saddles and sent a hot fire of lead at it. Hippy and Tom unlimbered at the same time and emptied their magazines at the attackers.

The night riders responded with a volley of bullets fired so low that they snipped up the dirt of the Overland camp. Lemuel uttered a howl of terror.

"Ah's shot! Ah's shot! Ah is!" yelled the boy.

"Merciful Heaven! What is it?" cried Arline, springing to her feet.

Grace and Elfreda pulled her down by main strength.

"What is it? Let me go!" she screamed, struggling to get away from them.

"Thi—is is life!" chattered Emma, herself on the verge of giving way to her fright. "You—you wanted life. Here it i—is. Just br—br—breathe in harmony and no harm can be—fall you."

"There they go again! Look out for yourselves," shouted Tom warningly as a fresh burst of lead sprayed over them.

Then the storm broke—the storm that Grace and Hippy had foreseen. The glassy yellow sky had turned to blackness, and billows of inky clouds were rolling down on them, and the swirling gale was lapping up the sand as it rolled on. Then it engulfed the camp of the Overland Riders with a roar, filling the air with suffocating dust, leaving the Overlanders gasping for breath.

CHAPTER III

LEMUEL SAVES HIS HAT

“**R**OLL yourselves up in your blankets!” shouted Miss Briggs, but her voice was lost in the roaring gale. Its fury was increasing with the seconds. It was each one for himself now, for none could do anything for his companions.

Each member of the party had buried himself in his blankets, but despite this protection sand sifted through. Most of the party had experienced sand storms before and knew what to expect, but those who had not were concerned beyond the discomforts of the moment.

The storm lasted for only a few minutes, but those minutes seemed hours, and when it passed a cool breeze, almost chilling, followed in its wake. When the Overlanders who were able to do so got up on their feet and realized that the storm had passed, they found Stacy lying in a hollow several feet deep and soaking wet. The wind had bared a water hole, and Stacy had rolled into it. Grace, Elfreda and Arline were buried under a mass of sand that

had almost suffocated them when Tom came to their assistance. Grace and Elfreda had succeeded in uncovering their faces, but Arline was not so fortunate, and was unconscious when they hauled her out, but whether she had fainted from fright or from lack of air no one knew.

"Tom! Where is Lemuel?" gasped Grace.

"I'm searching for him," called Hippy. "He was right here when I last saw him. L-e-m-u-e-l!"

"Heah," answered a voice that sounded far away.

"Are you all right?" cried Nora, herself considerably shaken from her experience.

"Ah reckons Ah's daid. I'se shot!"

"I have him. Fetch a light, please," directed Hippy, dragging the boy from a hollow in the sand.

Tom hastened to him with a pocket lamp, followed by Grace, Emma and Nora, Elfreda being at the moment engaged in resuscitating Arline Thayer.

"He has been hit! Oh, the poor boy!" cried Nora.

There was blood on Lemuel's cheek and on his yellow tie, but the plug hat, now filled to the brim with sand, was tightly gripped in his hand.

"Boss, Ah's goin' ter die. Whar dat mule?" wailed the boy.

"He probably is emptying the water hole that I fell into," answered Stacy, joining them at this juncture.

"Shot, eh?" chuckled Hippy, drawing something from the guide's cheek, a proceeding that drew an unearthly howl from him. "Stop it! Don't be such a baby. You haven't been shot. Look! A stem of greasewood, probably snapped off by a bullet, scratched his cheek," he added, holding up the stick for the inspection of his companions. "Get up! You're all right. Grace, ask Elfreda to wash the scratch with antiseptic solution."

"Elfreda is taking care of Arline. I will attend to the boy," replied Grace. "Tom, hadn't you better look for the horses?"

The two men, accompanied by Stacy, set out to search for their mounts. As Stacy had surmised, Lemuel's mule was in the water hole which he had trampled into a huge pie and was now rolling in it. The mule's body was already well plastered with the sticky mess. They left the mule and hastened on to look for their mustangs, but failed to find a single one of them.

"That settles it!" growled Tom Gray. "We shall have to hoof it back to Carlos."

Hippy Wingate was inclined to differ with him. It was his opinion that at least some of the animals would be found, and even if only one were left, the Overlanders would be enabled to send a rider out to look for the other missing ponies. The three men circled about the camp for more than an hour without finding a trace of a single mustang, and when Stacy proposed that they return to camp and get something to eat, they decided that that would be the most sensible thing to do in the circumstances.

"I have found one pack. We have saved all the blankets," announced Grace upon the return of the men. "Lemuel has recovered from his fright and is now trying to induce the mule to come out of the water hole," she added laughingly.

Tom gathered some sticks and soon had a small fire going, which was most welcome, for the girls were shivering in the cool air that had followed the storm. They were solemn when informed that no trace of the mustangs had been found. Tea, however, warmed the party and stimulated their spirits, and then a more thorough search was made for their equipment which was finally found. Hippy and Tom then went out on another search for the missing ponies, but without result. It was finally de-

cided to await daylight, so all hands turned in for a few hours' sleep. They awakened with the sun in their eyes and the sound of Lemuel's voice, raised in song, in their ears, as he worked over the mule. A sudden shout from him brought the Overlanders to their feet.

"Dar dey come!" he yelled, and, to the amazement of the Overland Riders, the mustangs were discovered trotting towards the camp, brought back by thirst.

"The mustangs are breathing in harmony," averred Emma. "Arline, let this be a lesson to you. Take a lesson from the mule and the mustangs."

Arline made no reply, but she looked at Grace appealingly, which significant action was not lost on Emma Dean.

There was sand in the food that morning and bitterness in the coffee, and, though Arline Thayer no longer complained, the expression on her face indicated her feelings. Arline was regretting bitterly that she had ever listened to the alluring stories she had heard so often of life in the open.

As soon as possible after breakfast packs were shaken out and relashed, and the party resumed their journey. They had gone but a short distance ere Tom descried an object half buried in the sand a short way ahead. That

object proved to be a dead pony. An investigation showed that the animal had been shot. A Mexican saddle and equipment was still on the dead animal's back. Hippy looked at Tom and Tom looked at Hippy.

"I wonder which one of us shot the poor beast," muttered Hippy.

"I wonder," reflected Tom. "I wonder, too, why we were shot at. It doesn't promise well, does it?"

Hippy averred that it promised a great deal.

The mountains were now drawing nearer, and the Riders soon began to encounter thickets of *mesquite*. Traveling became more difficult, but they knew that, once in the foothills of the mountains, they would be fairly free from it. The foothills were reached just before sundown that day, but it was decided to press on until they found a desirable camping place. This they found before dark. The air was quite cool, fragrant with the familiar odor of mountain foliage, and most refreshing after the two days on the hot sandy plain. Camp was made and all hands began carrying water from a pool for much needed baths. Bathing in that cold water was chilly business and chattering voices were heard on all sides, but it put new life into every member of the party, Arline included.

Lemuel soon had a snapping fire going and no time was lost in brewing tea and preparing supper.

"We are all breathing in harmony once more," observed Stacy solemnly.

"Then see to it that you do not get short of breath," retorted Emma, which raised a laugh at the fat boy's expense.

After supper they got out their maps and began discussing their further journey. Lemuel, who was supposed to be familiar with all that part of the country, exhibited a surprising lack of knowledge of it, so there was no other way than to lay out their own trails and follow them as best they might. They were thus engaged when a hail from beyond the camp instantly banished thoughts of trails from mind.

"Come in, stranger," called Hippy.

A tough little Mexican pony trotted into the camp. The rider, upon discovering that there were women in the party, swept off his sombrero, a sombrero that was decorated with a horsehair band and silver ornaments. A bright silk scarf in which jewels flashed, a sparkingly embroidered vest, bright red sash and belt secured with a large silver buckle, added to the elegant appearance of the man. He wore diamond earrings and diamond rings. It was a

startling change from what the Overland Riders had been accustomed to encountering. From the tops of his fringed, ornamented chapejos swung two heavy, silver-mounted revolvers.

The party gazed in amazement.

"What is this—a comic opera that we have met up with?" wondered Emma in a voice that must have been plainly audible to their caller.

The Mexican swung gracefully from his saddle and, stepping forward, made a sweeping bow to the Overland girls.

"Señoritas, I greet you," he murmured, fixing his black, shining eyes on Emma, who elevated her chin disdainfully, but made no reply.

"What can we do for you?" asked Tom.

"Much, señor, much; but of that more at another moment. These mountains seldom see señoritas so beautiful as these," he added, with a wave of the hand that took in the girls of the Overland party.

"Leave the señoritas out of it, if you please," retorted Hippy gruffly. "What is it you wish?"

"I am Señor Gonzales, an honest rancher, and I would inquire who you are and what you do here," he informed them.

"You are welcome to an answer, though I do

not see how our affairs can concern you in the least," replied Tom Gray.

"You're one of those Mexican dandies that occasionally blow across the Rio Grande looking for trouble, aren't you?" spoke up Stacy.

"Be quiet," rebuked Miss Briggs. "I do not like the fellow any more than you do, but let us discover what he wants."

Hippy told him who and what the Overland party was, at the same time recalling what Tom Bainbridge had told him before they set out on their ride.

"Is your name Carlos Gonzales?" questioned Tom.

"The same. You have heard, señor?"

"I have heard the name, but in just what connection I can't at the moment recall."

"It will give me pleasure to have the ladies call and accept my hospitality. My ranch is at the other end of the Davis Range. When may I look for the ladies to bring joy and grace to my humble ranch home?"

"We thank you, but we are not making calls," answered Tom, who, like his companions, felt an instinctive aversion to the polite but shift-eyed Mexican rancher. "Is there anything else that we can do for you?"

"*Si, Señor. Much.*"

"Well, what is it?" demanded Hippy.

“Last night as certain of my friends—my ranchmen—were hurrying to my home, they were fired upon by a party camped on the plain. A horse was killed and a man wounded. Señor, what have you to say to that?”

“So, that’s the game, is it?” growled Hippy. “Well, what about it?”

“The señors, with a thousand apologies to the señoritas, will of course pay for the animal they shot,” suggested the Mexican.

“We will not. You surely have nerve. Listen! Your men, if that is the party you refer to, fired on our camp, not once, but several times. We naturally fired back. I am of course sorry that we shot a horse. It wasn’t the horse that fired on us. Next time we shall see that it isn’t a horse that is hit.”

“That is not as they tell the story to me, Señor. The attack was unprovoked. You shall pay. I will see that you do,” warned Gonzales.

“How?” interjected Elfreda Briggs, whose legal training impelled her to get into the argument.

“The law, Señorita. I shall implore the assistance of the law and—”

“Try it!” fairly shouted Hippy Wingate. “Now get out of this! And listen! Next time your ranchmen pass our camp advise them to

keep their rifles in the saddle-boots. Please move. We need the room you are taking up here. Skip!"

The Mexican was about to speak, when Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson entered the scene, wearing his plug hat set at a jaunty angle, the yellow tie spread out over his shirt to give the best possible effect. Lemuel could not resist the temptation to exhibit his raiment to the Mexican dandy.

The scowl that had wrinkled Gonzales' face faded, giving place to an expression of amusement. His eyes sparkled and snapped, and a gleam shot from them—a gleam that might have meant the reflection of any one of several emotions. Stacy Brown haw-hawed, and grins appeared on the faces of some of his companions, for the sight and the effect on the Mexican were both laughable.

Lemuel had strolled the entire length of the open space in which the camp was located, and a moment more would be out of sight in the bushes when an interruption occurred that for the moment startled the Overlanders into a condition of amazement.

With a speed that they had seen exhibited only a few times in their wanderings in the wilder parts of the country, they saw the Mexican flash out his revolver and fire as he raised

it. The bullet hit Lemuel's plug hat and sent it spinning to the ground. The boy uttered a yell, just as a second bullet hit the hat before it had stopped rolling.

Hippy was the nearest to Gonzales, and he saw that the fellow had accomplished exactly what he sought to do when he fired. Gonzales sheathed his weapon and the bold, mocking black eyes turned towards him did not serve to temper Hippy's rage.

"Pardon, Señor," begged the Mexican with a profound bow.

"Pardon, Señor," mocked Hippy Wingate, and at the same instant his fist shot out, catching Señor Gonzales on the point of the jaw, lifting the Mexican dandy clear of the ground, on which he collapsed unconscious.

CHAPTER IV

CALLERS DROP IN

“GET his guns!” It was Grace Harlowe’s voice, pitched high and shrill. Hippy Wingate sprang forward and snatched both weapons from the prostrate man’s holsters. He then ran his fingers over Gonzales’ body in search of other weapons, but only a pair of long knives was found. These the Overlander did not disturb, considering that revolvers in his own hands would more than offset the knives. After “breaking” the revolvers and ejecting the cartridges, Hippy replaced the weapons in their holsters just as the Mexican began to come to.

Carlos, observed curiously by the Overland Riders, twisted his head cautiously from side to side and finding that he could do so, slowly raised himself on one elbow and gazed at the spectators of his humiliation. Hippy Wingate finally assisted him to his feet and stepped back.

“Pardon, señoritas,” bowed Carlos, whose pale face accentuated the blackness of his eyes.

"Señor," he added, turning to Hippy who stood with arms folded, narrowly watching the man. "You have insulted—you have given insult that no man can give to Carlos Gonzales and live!"

"Get out before I kick you out!" retorted Hippy savagely. "I have met up with your kind before, and they are all as yellow as the sky was last night before the storm. Are you going?"

"Yes!" The Mexican's weapons flashed from their holsters, and the sharp metallic ring of hammers on empty chambers was heard as he pulled the triggers of both revolvers.

Arline Thayer screamed and swooned. She did not know that the weapons were now as harmless as a pair of toy pistols. Neither did the Mexican know that. After snapping each revolver at least six times he understood.

"Bah!" he cried. "For this you shall die! *Adios, señoritas. Adios— Mañana, Señor!*" he added explosively, and sneering at Hippy he turned and mounted his horse.

"Don't stop. Keep on going," advised Tom Gray.

The instant the Mexican had passed out of the light of the campfire, Hippy ran out to protect himself and his companions from what he felt was certain to follow. As he reached the

shadow of the bush he heard the creak of a saddle and knew that a horse was close at hand, though motionless. The creak, as he rightly deduced, was caused by a man mounting or dismounting, and a cautious step a moment later told him that Gonzales had got down from his horse and was creeping towards the camp.

Hippy crouched down behind a tree and waited, but barely had he taken that position ere the figure of the Mexican was outlined less than a dozen paces from him.

"Mr. Man! Get back to your horse before I plug you!" warned the Overlander. "Hit the trail and hit it hard or—"

"Bang, bang!"

Hippy heard the whistle of a bullet over the bush behind which he was hiding, but the second bullet evidently went wild, for he did not hear it. He answered the shots by firing low three times in quick succession. A smothered exclamation, a man floundering through the bushes, the crashing of a horse as it was spurred through the scattering clumps of mesquite, told the rest of the story. Gonzales had taken a hurried departure, but whether or not he carried one of Hippy's bullets with him the Overlander did not know.

"Hippy!" shouted Tom Gray. "Are you there?"

"On both feet," answered Hippy with a chuckle.

"Di—id you kill him?" gasped Arline, turning a pale face towards Hippy as he stalked into camp.

Hippy shook his head.

"I hope we have heard the last of that cheap greaser," he growled. "Do you know who that dude is? He is a fellow that Tom Bainbridge warned me against before we started out. Gonzales is bad medicine."

"Huh! He'd better keep away from this camp," threatened Stacy.

"He didn't know that you were here, little man," soothed Emma. "I doubt his coming again, now that he knows we have you to guard us. Who is the fellow, anyway, Hippy?"

"A rancher, I believe. You heard what he said. Tom, I think it will be wise to set a watch for the night. Gonzales might return with some of his friends. Suppose you and I stand guard."

"We must do so. The rest of the party may turn in. Lemuel!" Tom's tone was sharp.

"Yes, sah."

"The next time we have callers, you will please not be so much in evidence. You nearly caused the death of yourself and Lieutenant Wingate. Don't forget—"

"Got a snack for a hungry man?" called a cheery voice from the shadows.

The nerves of the Overland girls jumped at the sound of a strange voice, reassuring as it was.

"Sure. Come on in," answered Tom Gray cordially.

The owner of the voice stepped briskly in and stood revealed in the light of the campfire, sweeping off his sombrero in deference to the women of the party.

"It's rather late, but then I see you are all wide awake. My name is McKay. I was riding through, and seeing your fire, dropped in to beg a cup of coffee. I lost mine down in the mesquite."

"Come right in, sir," urged Grace. "We will have a fresh pot piping hot for you in a few moments. Lemuel, water, please. Step lively."

While Grace was making coffee the stranger made himself at home by sitting down by the campfire, his blue laughing eyes and smiling face instantly attracting the favorable opinion of the Overland Riders.

"As you are probably aware, ladies and gentlemen, it isn't customary in this part of the country to be too inquisitive about who and what persons are, but if you wish to tell me

about yourselves, you will satisfy my curiosity."

Tom Gray introduced himself and the members of his party, adding that he had been a captain of engineers in the World War, and that Hippy Wingate had served as a fighting air pilot, and the girls of the party as ambulance drivers, hospital and Red Cross workers.

"Miss Briggs, when at home," he further explained, "is a successful lawyer, but out in the open on our regular summer trips, she is just a good fellow."

"Thank you, Tom. That is quite the finest compliment you ever paid me," smiled Elfreda.

"That is because we have company," suggested Emma. "Mr. McKay, do you breathe in harmony?"

"I don't reckon that I rightly know what you mean, but maybe sometimes I don't." The lines about the mouth of the caller tightened ever so little and a new expression flashed into his eyes, which, in the next second, gave place to their former good-humored twinkle. "No, I don't reckon that I always breathe in harmony. Where do you folks plan to ride?" he added, sipping a cup of steaming coffee.

"Through the Guadalupes—anywhere that our ponies see fit to carry us," Hippy informed the caller.

"Guadalupes, eh? Captain Gray, do I understand you to say that you are a government agent?"

"I shouldn't call it that. I am a forester, and for some time have been making forestry surveys for the government. That is the business side of my visit here."

"Hm-m-m! Say anything about it back there?" questioned McKay, with a jerk of the head in the direction whence they had come.

"Why, perhaps I may have said something of the sort to Tom Bainbridge. There need be no secrecy about my mission, you know. Why do you ask that question, Mr. McKay?"

"Curiosity perhaps. You see I am a curious fellow—in some directions. Some persons might call me nosey. Maybe I am, so we'll let it go at that. Seen any strangers since you got into the mountains?" The caller's twinkling eyes regarded the Overlanders in a swift comprehensive glance.

The members of the party were silent, until Tom stepped in with a question.

"Do you know a man named Gonzales?" he asked.

"I've heard of him," replied McKay rather grimly, they thought.

"What sort of man is he?" persisted Tom.

"I reckon you know the answer to that ques-

tion already, Captain Gray," was the laughing reply, and the Overlanders joined in the laughter. Their laughter, however, abruptly ceased as they noticed a swift change pass over the face of their caller. McKay rose slowly, and it was observed that one hand slid cautiously to the revolver that swung at his hip.

"What is it?" whispered Grace Harlowe.

There was no reply. McKay's every faculty seemed concentrated on something beyond the camp, but, whatever it was, it was hidden from sight in the mesquite.

A shrill cry of terror broke the silence. The Overlanders' hands went to their weapons.

"Don't shoot! The boy's out there," warned McKay. "I reckon—"

Two revolver shots just outside the camp followed by another yell of terror, sent the caller bounding towards the scene.

"Stay where you are!" he flung back to the Overland party.

Tom and Hippy started to follow McKay, but halted as they met the colored boy staggering into camp. Lemuel uttered a moan and collapsed at their feet. Then out in the mesquite a rattling fire sprang up and the spang of revolver bullets was heard close at hand.

"Let's go!" shouted Hippy, taking the lead and starting at a run for the mesquite.

CHAPTER V

THE UNINVITED GUEST

STACY BROWN, uttering a whoop, followed the two men out of camp, which was not like him at all, for Stacy ordinarily sought safe cover in moments of peril. Arline had collapsed and lay trembling with fright. Grace, Elfreda and Emma, however, ran to Lemuel who lay stretched out on the ground.

They found him unconscious.

"Is—is he shot?" begged Emma anxiously.

"I don't know," answered Grace briefly.

"Keep down. There may be more shooting."

"He has a big lump on his head," announced Miss Briggs.

A scattering fire of revolver shots caused the girls to crouch lower, but they did not hesitate, and Grace and Elfreda continued their examination of the boy with calmness and efficiency.

"I find no bullet wound," finally announced Miss Briggs. "He has been hit over the head with something."

The firing stopped almost instantly, and a few moments later, Tom and Hippy returned. At the edge of the camp they fell over Stacy Brown who lay flat on the ground. He had gone but a few yards before seeking cover and there he had remained until the end of the shooting.

"Get up. It's all over," announced Hippy sarcastically. "Is anything the matter with Lemuel?" he called as they stepped into camp.

"Yes. He has been hurt," answered Grace.

"Shot?" cried Tom.

"No. What happened out there?"

"We don't know. There was shooting, but who did it, except for one shot we saw McKay fire, we do not know."

The two men bent over and regarded Lemuel anxiously. As they looked, he opened his eyes and rolled the whites of them from side to side.

"Wha—whar dat hat?" he begged anxiously.

"Never mind the hat. What happened to you?" demanded Tom Gray.

"Ah wants mah hat," insisted Lemuel.

"Stacy, go find the boy's hat," requested Emma.

"What? Go out there? I will not," answered the fat Stacy.

Emma started for the mesquite, her chin elevated disdainfully.

"Here, here!" cried Tom. "You mustn't."

"You come back here, Emma Dean!" commanded Hippy. "The hat will keep until I can get it for him. What I wish to know is what hit the boy. Lemuel, if you feel able to talk, tell us what happened to you. Then I will see if I can find your hat."

Lemuel sat up, swaying a little. Miss Briggs gave him a drink of water, at the same time supporting him with one hand.

"Ah was waterin' dat mule when er feller grabbed me. Ah got 'way from him. He fol-lered me and hit me er clip on de haid. Ah don't reckon Ah knows much moah 'bout what happened. Ah thought it was dat fool mule dat had kicked me."

"How many men did you see?" interrupted Tom Gray.

"Ah didn't see nobody. Ah felt somebody, dat's all. Is Ah goin' to die?"

"No such luck," grumbled Stacy.

"Chunky!" rebuked Nora Wingate. "I am ashamed of you."

Lemuel was placed on a blanket near the fire and told to stay there, and while the others were discussing the incidents of the evening, Miss Briggs continued to treat the swelling on the colored boy's head. Arline joined the group, pale and trembling.

"How—how long is this terrible excitement going to continue?" she questioned with chattering teeth.

"Why, dear, it hasn't begun," replied Emma. "Just breathe in harmony and you won't mind these little interruptions."

"Please don't," begged Nora. "You are unkind."

"There are others," observed Miss Dean airily. "What became of Mr. McKay?"

Tom said that he didn't know. The last they saw of their caller, he said, was when McKay was shooting at someone in the mesquite. All agreed that McKay was something of a mystery. Who and what he might be, none could even guess. However, turning to the demands of the present, it was decided that their camp must be guarded all night. Lieutenant Hippy Wingate offered to stand guard for the night. Stacy volunteered to take the watch after daylight, which offer brought derisive laughter from his companions.

"Of one thing, I am certain," announced Emma. "That Mexican dandy is the person who has caused this trouble for us. I knew he would come back."

"Only fools are sure," observed Stacy wisely.

"Stacy!" cried the girls.

"Are you sure of that?" questioned Emma sweetly.

"Of course I am. I—" Stacy hesitated, and his further retort was lost in the laughter of his companions.

"I reckon that will hold you for a time, young man," reminded Hippy. "I would suggest that you folks turn in and get some sleep. Better look at St. Petersburg's head, Elfreda. In the meantime I will see if I can find his hat."

While preparations for the night were being made, Tom and Hippy went out to look for the lost hat, and at the same time to see that the ponies were secure for the night. The two men also were concerned for the safety of the camp. Upon their return Grace confided to her husband that she was certain she had heard someone moving about in the near distance.

"Don't speak of it to the girls, Grace," said Tom. "Arline is on the verge of hysteria as it is. Hippy will keep a sharp lookout, and I would suggest that you girls turn in. What do you think about Lemuel?"

"Elfreda says that the boy had a narrow escape from a fractured skull, but thinks he will be all right by morning. Who do you suppose could have assaulted him?"

Tom Gray said he had not the slightest idea.

Soon after that the Overlanders turned in and Lieutenant Wingate took up a position just outside the camp, standing guard alone, and the camp soon settled down to quietness, except that for the first half hour Tom Gray's rest was disturbed by an occasional moan from Arline in the adjoining tent. Arline was having bad dreams. Later on she awakened with a start as the stillness of the night was split by the cry of a coyote, but soon fell asleep again.

Hippy's watch was several times disturbed by slight sounds. He was positive that he heard prowlers about, and the ponies at such times showed restlessness. He investigated each time, but without result. After a time the Overlander sat down and in a few moments was asleep. Going to sleep while on duty was one of Hippy's failings. However, no harm resulted from his nap, and he and the other Overlanders were awakened with a jolt when Lemuel broke into song with the rising of the sun. Nora came out just as Hippy was getting to his feet. She regarded him narrowly.

"Hippy, you have been asleep," she accused.

"Just a wee cat nap," admitted Lieutenant Wingate sheepishly. "Honest, I didn't sleep all the night."

"How do you know?" demanded Emma, who, with her companions, had come out in time

to hear the dialogue. The Overlanders laughed and Hippy's face flushed.

"Tom Gray, look what I found on your saddle," interrupted Stacy on his return from a spring with a pail of water. "It's a message addressed to you, Thomas. I haven't read it, I never do read anything that isn't addressed to me. I'm a model man," chuckled the fat boy, nodding at Emma.

"I agree with you, Stacy," she said. "By the way, do you know what, according to the dictionary, a model young man is, little boy?"

"Of course I do. A model is—well, a model is a model, that's all."

"Wrong again. A model of anything is an imitation of the real thing."

"Kindly hand me the message," requested Tom, as he reached for the bit of paper crumpled in the fat boy's hand, and laughing at Emma Dean having again gotten the best of Stacy. "Hm-m-m," mused Tom as he frowned over the message. "I don't know what to make of this. Perhaps some of you bright minds, and especially our lawyer-friend, J. Elfreda Briggs, may be able to get something out of it. Listen! I'll read it:

"'Turn left and head towards the Rio Grande. The route you are following isn't safe. Keep on as I say until you reach Vic-

toria Peak, then round into the Sierra Diablos. Danger the way you are now headed.' "

"Is there no name signed?" asked Grace.

"Yes. 'Willy.' "

"Ha, ha!" exploded Stacy. No one gave heed to his levity.

"It is my opinion that the writer is laying a trap for us," declared Lieutenant Wingate.

Grace disagreed with him.

"To follow the writer's directions would take us a long way out of our course, would it not, Tom?" she asked.

Tom Gray nodded.

"Elfreda, what is your judgment?"

"Not knowing what the writer's motives may be, we might as well go on as we have planned. We are likely to get into difficulties either way, so what's the odds?"

"Oh, let's go back," begged Arline. "Let me go back. I shall die. I know I shall. I never can go through with it."

"Too late," rumbled Stacy.

"Be harmonious, Arline dear," urged Emma.

"Drop the nonsense! Let's get down to business," suggested Hippy. "All in favor of going on as planned, say so. Contrary, no."

The vote was for going on, Arline not voting. After breakfast the spirits of the party rose,

and an hour later they were in the saddle picking their way along, penetrating deeper and deeper into the mountains. Lemuel wore a big lump under his battered high hat, but the lump did not interfere with his singing, which he kept up all the morning until the Overlanders, wearying of it, told him to stop.

"Yes. For goodness' sake give the birds a chance," begged Emma Dean.

"Do not sing any more to-day. We don't wish to give notice that we are here," added Tom Gray in a tone intended only for the ears of the colored boy.

Up to the time they went into camp that night, they had seen only one human being and that was a Mexican, an aged man, who lived alone in a shack in the mountains, and who begged some bacon from them. Camp was made in a rather dense thicket of mesquite and pines, and, for the first time on this journey, the tents were pitched.

In making camp, a big diamond-back rattlesnake was turned out from his resting place, notice of the occurrence being given by a shout from St. Petersburg Johnson, who stood at a safe distance from the scene while Hippy Wingate fired six shots at the angry serpent before the rattler was finished.

Arline declared that she wouldn't dare go to

bed in that awful place. Emma suggested that she tie a pillow to the back of her head and sleep standing up against a tree.

"You are all afraid, but you won't own up to it," accused Arline. "Lemuel, you will confess, I know. You are afraid of rattlesnakes, aren't you?"

"Wal, Missie, Ah ain't zactly 'feard of 'em, but when one of them fellers gits nervous in his tail Ah gits de same way in mah feet' right smart."

It was observed that the Overlanders took more than ordinary caution that night to see to it that there were no lurking serpents in their tents, and at least one of them spent a restless night, with murmurings and dreams of snakes. Hippy and Tom stood watch until three o'clock in the morning, after which they routed out Stacy Brown and made him take the watch for the remaining few hours before daylight. Stacy went out grumblingly, stirred up the campfire, lay down beside it and promptly went to sleep, tightly rolled in his blanket.

It was early morning when he awakened, and the sun was well up, but the rest of the Overland party were still sound asleep. Stacy grumbled because he had awakened so early, but was too sleepy to wonder what it was that had caused him to awaken. Ordinarily some

violence was necessary to bring him back to morning consciousness. The boy turned over for another nap, then suddenly sat up.

“Wha—at!” he muttered.

Beside him, so near that he could reach out and touch it, there lay an object that had not been there when he turned in for another nap. That object, he discovered, after rubbing his eyes, was a man—a stranger—comfortably rolled in a much worn blanket and sound asleep.

CHAPTER VI

STACY MAKES A CAPTURE

STACY BROWN, unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes, blinked and blinked. The man before him, whose head and shoulders only were observable above the faded blanket, was plainly an old man. His hair was graying, his face and forehead wrinkled and weatherbeaten. He was apparently sound asleep.

"I'll bet he's one of those mountain bandits," muttered Stacy. "I'll show him and the Overlanders that Stacy Brown is on the job." Stacy cautiously drew his revolver from its holster, and thrusting it close to the head of the sleeping man gave him a poke with his free hand.

The stranger grunted, opened his eyes and peered up at the red face of the fat boy.

"You keep still or it'll be the worse for you!" warned Stacy as savagely as he knew how.

The stranger half raised himself on one elbow, keeping his eyes fixed on the flushed face

above him, then his eyes slowly traveled to the revolver that was hovering close to his face. He leaned forward ever so little, sniffed the muzzle of the weapon, then, uttering a grunt, sank back with closed eyes and apparently went to sleep.

"Overlanders!" shouted Stacy after recovering from his amazement.

They responded on the run, rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they emerged from their tents, Hippy and Tom in the lead.

"What is it?" shouted Lieutenant Wingate. "Where are you?"

"Here," answered Stacy. "I've got one this time. Hurry before I finish him."

"What's this? What's this?" demanded Hippy as he strode up to the scene and halted, gazing down at the stranger. "Put away that gun!" he commanded. "A gun in your hands is dangerous to everyone, including yourself. Put it away, I tell you!"

"But he will get away," protested Stacy.

"Not just yet he won't. Here, Tom, will you look at this?" he urged as Tom Gray joined him. "Stacy has made a capture, but the captive doesn't appear to be deeply concerned over it. Wake up!" he ordered, giving the man a shake.

Stacy Brown very reluctantly returned his

weapon to its holster, but stubbornly held his position. The man opened his eyes and looked up at the faces of the entire Overland party, that had now reached the scene.

"Get up, please, and let us have a look at you," directed Tom Gray.

The caller slowly unrolled himself from his blanket, sat up, smoothed down his long gray whiskers and stroked his hair.

"Mornin', folks," he greeted.

"Now, Mister Man, give an account of yourself. Who and what are you, and what are you doing here?" demanded Hippy.

"Name's Belden—Crazy Bill Belden they calls me, 'cause I've been lookin' fer gold in these heah hills fer a good part o' my life. Who be ye?"

"We are the Overland Riders, out for our summer's vacation," Tom Gray informed the man. "You haven't explained how you chanced to come here."

"I seen your fire and reckoned as you wouldn't object to a feller warmin' his feet and takin' a sleep. I reckoned as this heah outfit was all right when I seen this little feller asleep. He looked so purty and innocent like that Crazy Bill said as no harm—"

The old prospector's words were lost in the laughter that followed at the fat boy's expense.

"Little feller, I warns ye to be a leetle bit keerful of weapons. They ain't safe in the hands o' children."

Stacy Brown's face went crimson.

"Don't you talk to me that way or you'll be sorry," warned Stacy. "I am not a child, and when I am stirred up I'm a bad man."

"Jest so, jest so," nodded the man. "They aire the most dangerous kind. Ye see, when they aire stirred up, as the little feller says, they ain't responsible fer what they does. Any objection to my cookin' a snack fer myself over yer fire?"

"No objection whatever," answered Grace, stepping forward. "You need not cook anything, though. You may have breakfast with us."

"Thankee. I reckons I'll make my own chuck. Ain't rightly wishin' to eat other folks' food. There's them as would pizen me that way if they could."

"As you wish. You are welcome to join us," replied Grace smilingly.

Stacy Brown did not smile. A frown wrinkled his face. He was angry, but he found no adequate words to express his resentment.

"Run along, little boy, and fetch water for breakfast. You will forget your worries at the sight of a nice warm breakfast," promised

Emma Dean. "Make your toilet first, of course."

"Better take your advice to yourself," flung back Stacy. "Your face is dirty."

"Stacy!" rebuked Nora Wingate.

"Dirt? Little man, do you know what dirt is?" questioned Emma sweetly.

"Of course I do. Dirt is dirt," grumbled the fat boy.

"Wrong as usual. Little boy, dirt is merely misplaced matter. Now run along like a good little man."

Stacy fairly flung himself from the presence of the Overlanders, and stamped off to the spring to wash and fetch water for the morning coffee. In the meantime Crazy Bill had gotten up and rolled his blanket into a neat pack, which he placed beside the fire and sat down on it. He then spitted several slices of bacon on a sharp stick and held them to the fire. While the bacon was toasting he helped himself to water that Stacy had brought, and deftly put over his coffee in a battered old pot that looked as if it had been in service for a generation.

The Overlanders were amused as well as interested in their uninvited guest. His skill in manipulating the cooking utensils would have done credit to a juggler, a skill generally

possessed by mountaineers and experienced campers. They do several things at once with two hands, aiming to bring everything off the fire, piping hot, at the same time, ordinarily using a bed of hot coals for the cooking, untying coffee and tea pouches, held between the knees, by using the teeth and making every movement count. The Overland Riders that day learned how an experienced outdoor chef prepared his victuals, and bombarded him with questions, few of which were answered. Belden evinced no inclination to talk, but devoted himself wholly to his breakfast. Finishing this, he lighted his pipe and puffed away reflectively.

Immediately following their own breakfast, the Overlanders began lashing packs and making other preparations to resume their journey. Crazy Bill showed some interest in the way they struck camp and rolled packs, but was still puffing absently at his pipe when they finally saddled and bridled the horses and made ready to move.

"Shall we see you again, Mr. Belden?" asked Emma.

"I reckon—I reckon mebby," was the brief answer.

The party mounted and rode away, waving good-byes, to which the old man gave not the slightest heed.

Lieutenant Wingate rode up beside Tom Gray.

"What do you make of that fellow?" he asked.

"Not much of anything. He is something of a mystery, I should say."

"Just so," agreed Hippy. "I have a feeling in the back of my head that his call on us was not wholly without motive. Those faded gray eyes of his are as keen as a hawk's when he permits them to be."

"We should worry. Probably we have seen the last of him," returned Tom lightly.

Hippy said he was not so positive on that point. In the meantime the girls were discussing the same subject, and wondering, but without coming to a conclusion.

The going was getting rougher, and Arline was complaining bitterly of the hardships, which she said she never could stand. Now and then Stacy would try to advise her, whereupon one of the girls would cry out, "Little feller, be a little bit keerful," in the words of Crazy Bill Belden. Laughing and chatting they continued on over rugged slopes and through passes dense with mesquite, then on to the higher regions where the sun blazed down fiercely and leather creaked louder on the sweating mustangs. As yet, the warning of

"Willy" had not been fulfilled, and they were beginning to think that they had done right in disregarding it.

At noon that day the Riders gave their mounts a much-needed rest with saddles and packs thrown off. Later in the day the same old search for a suitable camping place was begun. A mountain stream in a narrow pass invited them to follow along its course until they came out on a level stretch that promised an ideal camping site.

"Here is the place," cried Tom. "It isn't down on my map, but perhaps it isn't on any one else's map either. All the better, eh, Hippy?"

"Sure. Whoa! I smell smoke," announced the Overland Rider. "Thomas, there is something wrong about that map of yours."

"Yes, it really is smoke," agreed Grace. "Stacy, ride into the breeze and see if you can find our neighbors."

Stacy declined with thanks; declaring that curiosity was a bad thing to be possessed of when traveling in wild sections.

"We will make camp and then look about," said Hippy.

The girls, however, were for riding on a little farther until they found a spot where there was less mesquite, so they walked their

ponies along the edge of the stream, glancing about for a favorable spot to pitch their tents. They came to an abrupt halt as they saw Lieutenant Wingate suddenly rein in and peer off to the left.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" they heard him exclaim. "Can you beat it?"

"What is it, Hip?" called Tom Gray, starting towards his companion.

"Come, have a look for yourself, Thomas."

Tom jogged up; then he too halted and gazed in amazement. The others were quickly lined up close behind the two men.

"Look there, you folks," chuckled Hippy, pointing to an open space of about half an acre in extent in the mesquite.

The Overlanders gazed in amazement.

"It's Bill—Crazy Bill!" cried Nora.

"You have guessed it, but how he came here ahead of us is more than I would attempt to guess," declared Lieutenant Wingate.

The old prospector had made camp—that is, he had opened his pack and built a cook fire, over which he was frying slices of bacon. Though not more than a dozen yards from where the Overland Riders were sitting their ponies, he gave no heed whatever to them. It was as if he were wholly unaware of their presence.

"Hello, Bill!" shouted Stacy Brown.

"Evenin'," answered Belden without looking up. His attention at the moment was centered on keeping the bacon over the fire and at the same time lifting the coffee pot from it.

"What a perfectly peaceful scene," cried Arline enthusiastically.

"Oh!" cried Nora.

The coffee pot had suddenly left the hand of the old man, and at the same instant the heavy report of a rifle boomed and echoed in the mountains, but it was not until he had snatched up the coffee pot and the Overlanders saw its contents spurting from a hole on either side that they realized what had happened. A bullet had gone clean through the pot and the coffee was running out. Bill clapped both hands over the holes, but the pot was so hot that he dropped it.

"Dismount!" cried Hippy.

"It has come," groaned Elfreda Briggs.

"Such a peaceful scene!" exclaimed Emma.

The Overlanders were out of their saddles ere the echoes of the rifle shot had died away, and were hurrying the animals to cover, Grace having pulled Arline Thayer from her horse to which the girl appeared to be frozen.

"Keep out of sight, all of you!" commanded Tom Gray.

CHAPTER VII

VOICES OF THE NIGHT

NOT a sound broke the stillness of the mountain pass as the Overlanders stood listening, well screened from observation. They had immediately set about tethering their ponies, but had not yet unsaddled them.

"We might as well unpack," finally announced Hippy.

"Do you think it is safe?" questioned Miss Briggs.

"We will go out and see," said Tom. "Hippy, are you with me?"

"Sure I am."

The two men walked out into the open space and stood talking, plainly revealed to anyone who desired to take a shot at them. Nothing happened, so the men walked forward towards Belden. They were followed by the girls, Stacy and Arline timorously bringing up the rear.

"Is—is there any danger?" begged Arline.

"Not if you breathe in harmony," answered Emma.

"It is my opinion that it was only a chance shot," suggested Elfreda. "You will recall that the report of that rifle shot sounded as though it came from a distance. Mr. Belden, do you think there is danger out here?" she asked, as the party approached the old prospector.

"Huh!" he grunted. Crazy Bill, in his efforts to save his coffee, had dropped the bacon into the fire, leaving him rationless and coffeeless. In his rage he had sat down and lighted his pipe which he was now sullenly puffing.

"Never mind, Mr. Belden, you shall have supper with us," consoled Grace.

"Don't want no supper," growled the old man.

"Surely you will have a cup of coffee."

"Don't want no coffee," persisted Belden stubbornly.

"Who you-all reckons done shot dat coffee pot?" interjected Lemuel, who, with his plug hat held behind him to protect it, had edged up closer to the prospector, and to whom he had addressed the question.

Belden made no reply other than a grunt.

"Who done dat, Ah arsk you-all?"

"Oh, shut up!" growled the prospector, which brought grins to the faces of the Overlanders.

“That will do for you, St. Petersburg,” rebuked Hippy. “What are you doing here, anyway? Get back there and unpack. Fetch the equipment to the edge of the clearing and get ready to make camp. We might as well settle our house before dark. Stacy, if you will be good enough to assist him I shall be obliged for the favor. I’ll be with you in a few moments. Tom, where shall we pitch the tents?”

“I would suggest at the edge of the clearing. I do not believe that we are in the slightest danger of being disturbed to-night, but we must be on the alert.”

Lieutenant Wingate said he agreed, and suggested that they fetch the provisions and have the girls start getting supper while the men made camp. Permission was asked of Belden to use his cook fire, which he granted with a grunt. For the following hour the camp of the Overlanders presented a busy scene, and, as twilight settled, appetizing odors assailed their nostrils. The men had the tents erected, but before they finished getting the equipment in place the call to supper interrupted the work.

“Come, now, Mr. Belden, sit in with us,” urged Hippy cordially. “Surely you aren’t going without your supper.”

“Don’t want no supper. This aire my camp and I kin do as I like, can’t I?”

"Of course," agreed Grace.

"Don't care what ye do. Let me alone, that's all."

"Mr. Belden, you have a perfectly horrid disposition," spoke up Emma. "The trouble with you is that you don't breathe in harmony. You would be so much better off mentally were you to do so. Why not let Miss Thayer teach you how?"

"Emma Dean! If you don't stop I shall scream," cried Arline. "I can't stand it any longer, and I must make a confession or I'll—"

"This is no time for confessions, dear," soothed Emma. "Just breathe in harmony and all will be well. Have a cup of coffee. There is nothing like coffee to make one breathe in harmony—and lay awake all night."

"Stop it, for the love of Mike!" begged Lieutenant Wingate laughingly. "Let us have peace, at least until we can get food in our stomachs. Between you two and our friend Crazy Bill Belden this is about the gloomiest outfit I have ever met up with."

"In view of the fact that you are a part of the outfit, why not set us an example of real cheerfulness?" suggested Emma smilingly.

"Emma is right, Hippy," nodded Grace. "I think Mr. Belden will agree with that, won't you, sir?"

"Huh! Won't agree with nothin'."

"There, Hippy, he doesn't agree with you—or perhaps he referred to Stacy when he said he wouldn't agree with 'nothin','" chattered Emma.

"Please, please," begged Miss Briggs, her voice barely being heard above the laughter that followed Emma's keen-edged retort.

However, the Overland Riders sat down to their supper in great good humor, a state of mind not shared by the prospector, who, all through the meal, sat stolidly puffing at his pipe and uttering not a word. Supper finished, all hands set to work to put the camp in order, a task that occupied only half an hour.

Speculation as to the shot that had been fired was not participated in by Belden, who said nothing at all, but devoted himself to his stubby black pipe and his own surly reflections. Grace, hoping to placate him for the loss of his coffee pot, gave him one of their own. He did not even thank her for it, following which the Overlanders left him wholly out of their conversation for some time.

Later in the evening, as they sat about the campfire, three distinct rifle reports, with an interval between the second and third shots, put each member of the party on the keen alert. It was answered by three similar rifle

reports, though they evidently were much farther away.

The Overland Riders looked at each other understandingly.

"A signal," said Grace.

"Yes," agreed Hippy, with a nod.

"A signal for what?" questioned Miss Thayer apprehensively.

"For harmony," chuckled Emma.

All eyes were turned towards Belden, but he gave no indication of having heard the signal shots. No further disturbance occurred during the evening, and shortly after nine o'clock the Overlanders began to turn in, but it was observed that they went to bed with their clothes on. Tom and Hippy lay down by the campfire rolled in their blankets, and Crazy Bill Belden found a resting place at some distance from them in the shadows. The camp soon settled down to silence, which was soon broken by the long-drawn wail of a coyote, answered by others. The howls drew gradually nearer. Then the silence of the night was punctuated by a thrilling wail.

Arline uttered a little cry of alarm.

"Oh, what was that?" she cried.

"Sh-h-h-h! It's the cry of the banshee," chattered Nora. "I've often heard my mother tell about it. It foretells disaster—death per-

haps. Be brave, Arline. There is nothing that we can do to ward it off, unless it be to count. I have heard it said that counting up to one hundred, then counting one hundred backwards, sometimes frightens the banshee. He is said not to like counting."

"Count, Arline dear!" whispered Emma. "It may assist you to fill your soul with harmony."

"Will you girls please be quiet?" demanded Grace. "I am trying to get to sleep."

Silence reigned in the Overland tent for some moments. Then it was Grace Harlowe's voice that first broke it.

"What is that light?" she questioned, sitting up and pointing to a mountain peak some distance to the westward of the camp.

"It looks like a fire, and it appears to be flickering," spoke up Elfreda.

"Tom, are you awake?" called Grace. "What do you make of that?" she added, as her husband answered in the affirmative.

"It seems to be a signal, but I can't be certain," said Tom Gray. "Better go to sleep. If it is a signal it is too far away to be of any concern to us."

It was about two o'clock in the morning when the camp was suddenly aroused by a hail. Tom and Hippy, both of whom had dozed off, were

on their feet with a bound. The Overland girls were sitting up at the same instant, some of them startled into sudden alarm.

"Hello! What do you want?" demanded Tom Gray.

"I reckons I want to talk with this heah outfit," answered a voice whose owner was not yet in view.

"Come in, whoever you are," answered Hippy.

At this juncture Miss Briggs ran out and flung an armful of wood on the fire, which blazed up into a crackling, snapping flame that lighted up the camp in a moment.

"Get back out of sight! Keep the girls out of it. I think we are up against it," ordered Lieutenant Wingate, hitching his revolver holster, and directing a quick glance of inquiry at Tom Gray. Hippy saw that Tom was ready for whatever might come. A glance in the direction of Crazy Bill Belden revealed that strange character stretched out on the ground loosely covered with his blanket, apparently sound asleep.

A man rode into the clearing, followed by half a dozen horsemen.

"Keep yer hands away from yer guns!" ordered the man in the lead. "I'll wing the first feller that makes a move!"

CHAPTER VIII

CRAZY BILL WAKES UP

“**G**IRLS, the usual has begun,” announced Elfreda Briggs as she darted into the tent occupied by herself and companions. “Look out there and you will be convinced.”

A white man led the party that was entering the Overland camp. He was short and swarthy and his face wore a scowl that looked as if it might be habitual. He was heavily armed. Behind him rode Carlos Gonzales, resplendent in chaps and jewels, a sarcastic smile on his face, one hand resting on his revolver holster. Following Gonzales were four Mexicans, supposedly his *vaqueros* or cowboys.

All this Tom Gray and Hippy Wingate took in at a glance, and realized that in all probability they were facing a serious situation. The Overland girls were peering out anxiously, and from behind a tent the whites of Lemuel's eyes might have been observed gazing fearfully at the Mexican rancher who had once shot the colored boy's hat off. Stacy Brown had found

refuge in the mesquite back of the camp and was manfully holding his position.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Tom Gray gruffly.

"If it is trouble you are looking for, let her go," urged Hippy. "Don't start anything you can't finish, though."

"I reckons we'll finish all right," growled the white man.

"Very well. Now what is it? Who are you and what do you want?" demanded Tom. "It is your move."

"I reckons you don't know me. I'm Pat Proll, an officer of the law, and I've come heah to make sartin inquiries 'bout sartin things that have happened since you folks been in the mountains." He paused to note the effect of his words, but neither Tom nor Hippy spoke. "This gentleman swears that you shot one of his ponies dead and wounded a *vaquero*, and he reckons you've got to settle."

"We have nothing to settle for. If there is settling to be done that comic opera bandit is the one to do it," jeered Lieutenant Wingate, nodding towards Gonzales. "It was his men who made an attack on us. Now what do you propose to do about it?"

"Ain't you goin' to settle?" questioned Proll.

"Not in the way you mean. We may settle in a different way if that cheap ruffian doesn't hit the trail pretty lively."

"Then it's my duty as an officer of the law to arrest you. I—"

"One moment, please!" It was Elfreda's voice that interrupted the officer.

Proll bowed awkwardly as she stepped forward, and Gonzales made one of his elaborate bows, sweeping his sombrero to the ground.

"I am a lawyer and represent this party," resumed Miss Briggs. "I desire to ask you a few questions. You say you are an officer?"

"I be."

"What is your office?"

"A Ranger—Texas Ranger. I reckons you've heard 'bout 'em."

"Yes. Who is your chief?"

"Why—er, I reckons—Miss, it don't make no difference 'bout that at all. You git out of this and leave me to do my duty."

"Whom are you going to arrest?"

"This feller," answered the officer, pointing to Hippy. "He is the feller who shot the pony and one of Señor Gonzales' *vaqueros*."

"What proof have you of that?" demanded Elfreda.

"Well—I reckons Señor Gonzales will swear to it; then there's them fellows with him heah

who will swear that they seen this man do the shootin'."

"I don't doubt it. From their looks it is my opinion that, to serve their own ends, they would swear to anything. I include Señor Gonzales in the list. If that is all the proof you have I advise you to withdraw before you get into trouble yourself. This is poor business for a Ranger to be in, Mr. Proll. Rangers are honorable men—men who do not take the part of questionable characters such as these men are. To make an arrest will not only bring discredit on the organization that you claim to belong to, but surely will get you yourself into serious difficulties," finished Miss Briggs evenly.

"Do ye mean to say I ain't what I say, a Ranger?"

"Are you?"

"I be and—"

"Pat Proll, ye lie!" The voice was a thunderbolt. It startled the Overlanders as well as Proll and the men with him. Proll whirled, drawing as he turned.

"Drop it!"

The officer found himself looking into the muzzles of two revolvers, in the hands of Crazy Bill Belden. Proll lowered his weapon and peered.

"I don't 'low no man to call me by that name, stranger, an' bein' as thar's plenty of guns ready to open up on ye, I don't mind sayin' that I fust ask who ye be?"

"Who be I? I'm the man that says you ain't no Ranger. I'm the man that says you're only a cheap deputy sheriff an' a bigger crook than this feller Gonzales, who ain't got a straight hair in his head. I—"

Two revolvers crashed almost at the same instant. Pat Proll dropped his weapon and grabbed his right hand with his left. A bullet had gone through the "deputy sheriff's" gun hand, a bullet fired by Crazy Bill Belden.

Like a flash the old prospector whirled and again his weapon spoke. This time it was aimed at Carlos Gonzales. The Mexican leaped into the air, and sat down heavily, holding one foot in both hands and rocking back and forth.

"Put up your hands, you fellows!" commanded Lieutenant Wingate, as the *vaqueros* made a move to draw their weapons. "Tom!"

Tom Gray's revolver was out, and now both he and Hippy were menacing the Mexican ruffians.

"Ride forward, one at a time, you fellows!" commanded Hippy. "Move! Bill, I'm going to disarm them. If you see one trying to play a trick on us let him have it quick!"

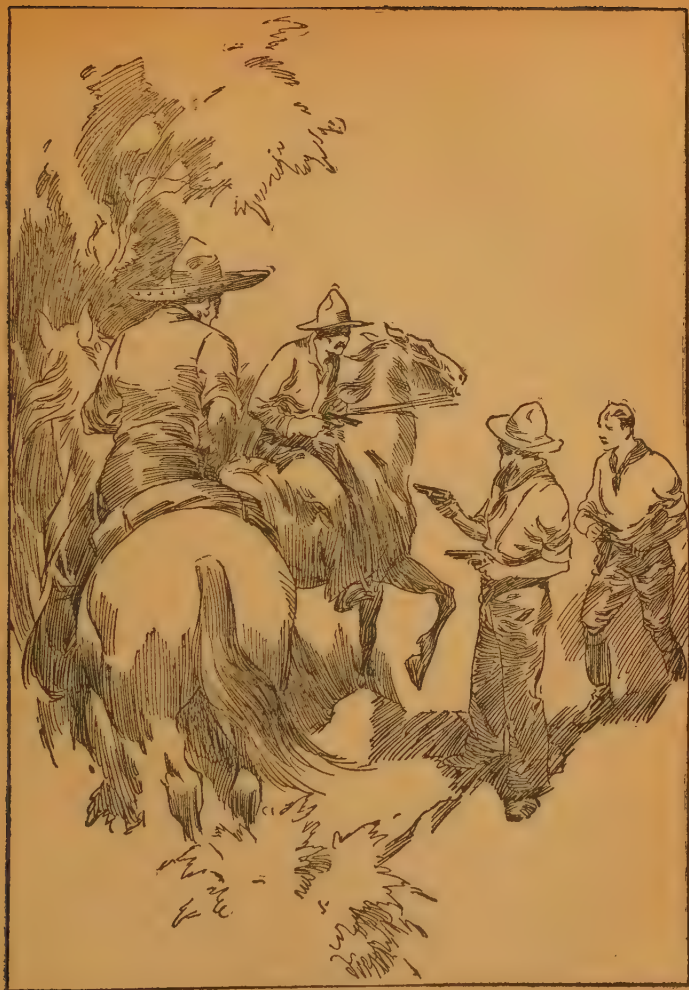
“Ain’t goin’ to play no tricks heah,” answered Belden.

A surly Mexican rode forward, and Lieutenant Wingate took the man’s revolvers from their holsters, emptied the cartridges from them and replaced the weapons. He did the same with the rifle that stuck in the saddleboot. This done he ordered the man aside and disarmed the next one. He continued with this until all the *vaqueros* had been disarmed, and Carlos Gonzales had once more been made helpless so far as weapons were concerned.

Miss Briggs now stepped forward and took Proll’s hand. He snatched it from her.

“Mr. Proll, I am going to dress your hand, so you had best hold still. After I have finished you are at liberty to do what you please with it. Will someone look after Señor Gonzales?”

The “deputy sheriff” submitted scowlingly to Elfreda’s ministrations. He had lost the end of the thumb of his right hand, but it was quickly and skillfully treated and bound. In the meantime, Tom Gray had, amid a volley of protests, removed Gonzales’ shining boot and examined the foot, into which Belden had fired a thirty-eight calibre bullet. Tom did the best he could with the wound until Elfreda had finished with Proll. She then finished the dressing of the foot, Lieutenant Wingate, in



“Drop It!”

the meantime, keeping a sharp eye on the others of the invading party.

Gonzales was then assisted to his saddle, Crazy Bill regarding all these activities with scowling face.

"Are we all set?" questioned Hippy cheerfully.

"I think so," answered Tom Gray.

"Now, Mr. Gonzales, you and your ruffians will please get out and keep away from this outfit. If you don't someone will shoot higher next time, in which event you will depart lying across your saddle instead of sitting in it. We are able to take care of ourselves and we propose to do it."

"The Señor shall pay for this," growled the Mexican. "The law will see to it that he is rightly punished."

"Having taken the law into your own hands, Gonzales, we assume the same right. Bill, what next?"

"All I got to say is to Pat Proll. You poor measly cayuse, I ought to have killed you and I'll do it yit if ye even bat an eye at me. Yer the scum of the Guadalupe, but watch out that the buzzards don't git ye. Git up!"

"I'll kill ye fer this!" fumed the deputy.

"Git out!" Belden whirled the man about and began kicking him out of camp.

“Oh, don’t!” cried the Overland Riders in chorus. “Don’t do that.”

“He has been wounded, Mr. Belden. You mustn’t,” begged Elfreda.

Belden gave no heed to their urgings, and continued to boot the unfortunate Pat Proll towards the outer side of the camp.

“Go afore I fergits myself,” warned the old prospector. “And don’t ye come back thinkin’ ye can git the drop on us. Next time thar’ll be some dead men ’mong that gang o’ yourn.”

The visitors made off with all haste.

“Whew! I am glad that little misunderstanding is ended. Bill, you are all right. We thank you—”

“Pack up! Git out o’ here hot foot. That gang and some more o’ ’em will be back heah before mornin’. Them signal fires on the mountain means business. I’ll show ye a place where to hide up, but ye got to go. Ye’ll be shot if ye don’t and mebbby ye’ll be shot if ye do. Hustle yerselves!” warned Crazy Bill.

CHAPTER IX

THE FLIGHT

“STACY!” called Lieutenant Wingate. “Young man, where have you been during this disturbance?” he demanded as the fat boy strolled into view.

“Where have I been? Humph! You ought to know where I have been. I have been out yonder watching to see that the camp wasn’t surprised by another bunch of bandits. You don’t appreciate what I do. I—”

“Cut it and get to work. We’re moving. Rustle yourself. Here, Lem, you get to work. Fetch the mule in, then roll packs faster than you ever rolled them before. We have got to be on the move in thirty minutes.”

“Running away, eh?” chuckled Miss Briggs. “That isn’t like the Overlanders.”

“We might let Stacy remain here, just to save our reputation for courage,” suggested Emma Dean.

“Where you go, I go,” answered the fat boy. “I don’t know what it is about, but I’m for it whatever it is.”

While the work of striking camp was in progress, Crazy Bill strolled back and forth at a little distance, now and then glancing toward the mountain peak on which, earlier in the night, the signal fire had been observed. What his fears were none knew, and Bill was saying nothing.

It was twenty-five minutes later by the watch when Hippy announced that they were ready, with the exception of shouldering their individual packs and mounting.

"Follow the stream until you git other orders," directed Belden.

"But aren't you going with us?" cried Nora.

"I'll jine ye. Everybody ride close to the hoss in front an' keep quiet."

The horses were started, Lemuel and the mule bringing up the rear. A thick belt of darkness lay over the pass, but higher up the stars shone faintly. The air was chill and Arline complained that she was shivering.

They had not gone far before a horse loomed faintly ahead. Hippy, in the lead, reined in and hailed.

"It's Bill," answered the rider, and a moment later they recognized the figure of Crazy Bill who was waiting for them. They had never seen him on a horse, did not know that he possessed one, and were now wondering

where he had secreted the animal and how he had managed to get ahead and intercept them. But then, Bill Belden was a strange man, a slow man, except when there were reasons for his being active.

"Foller me," he ordered, and turning his mount he jogged along, plainly familiar with the trail that was being followed.

It lacked but an hour to daylight when the old guide splashed through the stream and began climbing the mountain on the opposite side.

"Purty hard climb, but keep close an' give the mustangs the rein. They'll find the way. You folks jest hang on, that's all ye have to do," advised Belden. Then began a long, arduous climb, saddle leathers creaking and ponies slipping. The Riders were too busy clinging to their saddles to indulge in conversation, and Arline Thayer was beyond speech from fright.

The party finally rode out on comparatively level ground, when their guide told them that they might make camp at the first spring they encountered.

"Give 'em the rein," was Belden's last injunction to the party.

Accordingly they again loosened up on the bridle reins and permitted their ponies to go

where they would. The trail wound in and out among rocks and boulders, a trail so tortuous that every member of the party lost all sense of direction until the sky began to turn gray, the harbinger of the coming dawn. It was still dark where they were, but little by little objects began to grow out of the landscape. To the left a blanket of impenetrable blackness covered the pass below. It was, as they supposed, the pass they had been following before climbing the mountain.

"Hippy, I don't see anything of Belden," reminded Tom Gray, riding up beside his companion.

"Don't worry. He is somewhere ahead of us. He told us to give the 'tangs the rein, and we have done so. My appetite is getting the best of me. How about yourself, Tom?"

"I am pretty well shaken down, I will admit," answered Tom Gray laughingly.

"What are you two laughing at?" called Grace, her spirits revived with the dawning of the morning.

"We were laughing at the thought of soon having breakfast," called back Hippy. "Hello! There is a spring. I reckon it is the one Bill had in mind when he told us to make camp at the first spring and stay there. Folks, shall we halt here for breakfast?"

A chorus of yesses answered him, and Hippy reined in and dismounted laughing heartily, at the same time declaring that he wasn't the only member of the party with an appetite, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

"You surely are a fine bunch," jeered Lieutenant Wingate as, for the first time that morning, he got a good look at the girls of the outfit. The hair of each one was down, faces were smudged from dirt, and the weariness they felt was plainly reflected in faces and eyes.

"Where is Mr. Belden?" cried Emma, brushing the hair out of her eyes and peering about. "I thought he was just ahead of you."

"He is," replied Hippy.

"Was, you mean," corrected Grace. "He left this party nearly an hour ago."

"How do you know that?" demanded Lieutenant Wingate, eyeing her questioningly.

"Because I was listening to the tread of his pony to make sure that we were following him. I heard the hoofbeats grow fainter and fainter as he set off. Then they died away altogether."

"Say, Loyalheart, had they had a few men in the navy with ears like yours there would have been no need of listening devices on the submarines in the great war," cried Hippy admiringly.

"Let's talk about breakfast," urged Stacy Brown. "My listening device is attuned only to food this morning."

While Lemuel was making a fire the men unsaddled the ponies and threw the packs on the ground, and the girls, after a thorough washing, started breakfast. Never had the aroma of coffee smelled sweeter to the Overlanders than it did on the chill mountain air that morning, nor had it ever proved more delicious to the taste. Their enjoyment for the moment made them forget that their friend Belden was missing, but it was not until after breakfast that concern over his absence began to be felt.

"What does it mean?" wondered Nora.

No one was able to answer the question. Grace questioned Lieutenant Wingate as to the conversation between him and Belden before the latter had disappeared. Hippy told her word for word.

"Then there is but one thing to be done—remain here until he returns. That is what he wished us to do. As for his losing us, that man couldn't lose a large party like this in these mountains," declared Grace with emphasis. "I propose that we make camp and stay here until we get word that it is safe to move on."

"Yes, there is more to this affair than we suspect," added Miss Briggs.

"You know the warning we had from Tom Bainbridge at Carlos to look sharp for border guerrillas," reminded Hippy.

"What are they?" questioned Arline tremulously.

"You may search me. Come, let's make camp. I'm sleepy."

"That is a good idea. We will all take a snooze after we get things in shape here," agreed Tom.

The tents were pitched and blankets placed in them, and Lemuel, who said he wasn't sleepy at all, was left to keep watch over the outfit. He showed his white teeth in appreciation of the important task assigned to him and began striding back and forth with his battered plug hat set at a jaunty angle. A few moments later the Overland Riders were sound asleep, unmindful of the sun that was blazing down on the little brown tents under which they slept until late in the afternoon.

In the meantime Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson had kept ceaseless vigil, now and then walking out to see that the ponies were in order, then stepping out on a point of rock that commanded a clear view for many miles of canyon and rugged mountain peaks.

"Ho, hum!" yawned Hippy, stretching his arms. "What time is it, Tom?" he muttered.

"Half past four, but for the life of me I don't know whether it is to-day, to-morrow or yesterday. I never slept so soundly in my life."

Hippy struggled to a sitting posture and peered out. No signs of life were visible about the camp.

"Lemuel!" he called. There was no response. "Confound that boy! I suppose he is asleep, and here I am starving with no one to get me a bite to eat."

"Just imagine that you have had a fine supper and you will find yourself in perfect harmony with the universe," piped the voice of Emma Dean from the adjoining tent.

"Don't tantalize a hungry man. St. Petersburg!" Hippy's voice developed into a roar.

"Don't awaken the boy. Remember, he hasn't had as much sleep as we have had," reminded Grace.

"I am not so positive about that."

Elfreda told him to be patient, and said that they would have supper going in a few moments, so Hippy pulled himself together, gave Stacy Brown a violent shake and went out blinking. He saw no indications of the presence of Lemuel, but did not give further thought to the fact until after he had washed the sleep out of his eyes at the spring. Lieutenant Wingate then began to look about for

their handy man, peering under bushes, behind rocks and at the rear of the tents.

"What are you looking for?" questioned Grace as she came out.

"I am looking for that boy, and when I find him there is going to be trouble—for him."

"Wait until after supper, Hippy. There is nothing like a nice warm meal to smooth the wrinkles from a ruffled temper," reminded Grace.

At this juncture the others of the party began to come out of the tents, Stacy turning out last of all, grumbling and finding fault because supper was not ready. There was laughter when Grace informed her companions that Lemuel had crawled away somewhere and gone to sleep.

"That is what comes from being in perfect harmony with one's self," averred Miss Dean. "After supper we will organize a searching party and find him. We surely cannot get along without St. Petersburg. Even a sleeping St. Petersburg is a joy."

Stacy Brown grunted and sat down, eagerly watching the preparations for supper while the girls reverted to the subject of Bill Belden and his non-appearance at the moment when they were depending on him to guide them to safety. Tom and Hippy, in the meantime, after get-

ting the cook-fire started, took a long survey of the surrounding landscape, but not a sign of life did they discover, even with the aid of their binoculars.

Supper was served soon after that. While eating they conferred on what was best to be done, whether to go on or to remain where they were in the hope that Belden might return and advise them. It was decided that, in view of the lateness of the hour, breaking camp would be foolish.

After finishing their meal the Overlanders divided themselves into searching parties and started out to look for the sleeping Lemuel. They worked in ever-widening circles, and soon the groups were out of touch with each other, owing to the rough nature of the landscape.

They had searched some distance from camp without finding a trace of Lemuel, and concern was now taking the place of merry chatter and laughter.

“Do—do you suppose anything could have happened to him?” begged Nora anxiously. “Grace, what do you think could have happened?”

“I am sure I do not know, Nora dear. I can think of nothing more serious than that he may have lost himself, but if so we shall find him and—”

"Hark!" admonished Nora. "I heard a shout. It's Hippy. Oh, I do hope he has found him. Hurry, Grace. He is down that way."

The two girls ran in the direction of Hippy's hail, and as they ran they were joined by other members of their party.

"Good news!" cried Tom Gray.

"What is it?" called Grace, somewhat out of breath from her sprint.

"Hippy has found him."

They came hurrying up to Lieutenant Wingate who stood looking down at a clump of bushes a few yards beyond him.

"Come easy. Don't trample about too much," he warned.

"Wha—at is it?" gasped Emma.

"Look!" answered Lieutenant Wingate, pointing.

At the edge of the bushes indicated by him lay the colored boy's hat, mashed flat, a hopeless wreck. Near by were pieces of his shirt, and a torn blouse which was instantly recognized as the one he wore when last seen by the Overland Riders. The vegetation in the immediate vicinity had been trampled down apparently under the pressure of heavy boots. One spot looked as though a person had lain there.

"Has a trail been left?" questioned Grace.

Hippy shook his head.

"Not so far as I have been able to discover. I haven't looked about. I—"

"Hippy! What does it mean?" cried Nora with a note of alarm in her voice.

"Yes, that's what I want to know," added Tom Gray.

"Something has happened to the boy. He plainly was attacked on this spot. If you will all stand where you are I'll see what else I can find," announced Hippy.

The Overlanders watched anxiously as Lieutenant Wingate went carefully over the ground, now and then getting down on his knees to examine a foot-print. The trail soon led him out of sight of his companions, who waited in anxiety for his return. It was some time before they saw him hurrying towards them.

"Did you discover anything?" called Tom Gray.

"Yes. Lemuel has gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed the Overlanders in chorus.

"Beaten and perhaps done for, and then taken away," answered Lieutenant Hippy Wingate.

CHAPTER X

DISASTERS COME FAST

“COME and I’ll show you,” announced Hippy, turning abruptly on his heel and leading the way to the scene of his discovery. “Two men at least were engaged in this outrage, and they must have beaten the boy terribly, for there are blood stains here. Over yonder two horses were tethered, and it is my belief that he was placed on one of them and taken away.”

“How terrible!” murmured Arline.

“Aren’t we going to try to follow the trail?” demanded Miss Briggs.

“We are, Elfreda,” replied Hippy. “At least I am. I will go as far as I can before dark. That is all that can be done now. Tom, it is up to you to stay here with the girls. We mustn’t leave them alone.”

“I thought Mr. Belden said this place was safe,” interposed Emma.

“No place is safe where the Overland Riders go,” answered Miss Briggs.

“Are you going on foot?” questioned Nora.

"Yes," replied Lieutenant Wingate. "I shall follow the trail by creeping along on all fours. Should Bill come in send him after me. I wish he were here now."

"Oh, do be careful, Hippy darlin'," begged Nora anxiously.

Hippy hastened back to camp, followed more slowly by his companions. Reaching the camp, he filled his ammunition belt with cartridges, strapped on his revolvers, and started away.

"I'll be back no later than dark," he called back, and a few moments later he disappeared from sight.

"What does it all mean?" wondered Grace. "First Mr. Belden disappears, and now Lemuel is whisked out of sight. Mr. Belden may have gone of his own volition, but the same cannot be said of our colored boy."

"As a lawyer, my intuition tells me that the boy's disappearance is part of a plan," suggested Elfreda.

"What plan?" demanded Tom Gray.

"Ah! That is the question," laughed Miss Briggs. "Did we know the answer to that we might understand our position and know what is best to do. If Hippy fails to find St. Petersburg, the wise thing to do, it seems to me, is for us to remain here for a day or so and give Mr. Belden an opportunity to get in touch with us."

“In the meantime no one must leave the camp unaccompanied. We have had an object lesson. Nor must the camp be left unguarded at night. We shall have to take turns on watch,” declared Grace. “Tom, you and Hippy must arrange the watches so that we girls may do our share. One girl and one of you men can stand watch together.”

Tom said they would cross that bridge when they came to it, and began thoughtfully pacing back and forth, pausing frequently to gaze off over the mountains and gorges. He was still pacing when early twilight slowly filled the passes and finally spread over the higher reaches like a blanket.

Nora suggested that they build up a bright fire as a guide for Hippy. Tom sternly forbade it.

“Aren’t we in enough difficulties now, without calling the attention of every man in the mountains to the fact that we are camping here? Build a small fire between the two rocks just back of the camp and pitch tents on either side of it. That will supply warmth through the night, and won’t be visible outside of the camp.”

The others agreed that the advice was good.

The anxious glances of the Overlanders were now cast towards the rapidly darkening peaks,

and Nora was growing more ill at ease with the moments.

Darkness had enshrouded mountain and canyon by the time arrangements were completed for the night, when the distant report of a gun brought the Overland Riders to attention. The report was followed by five other shots; then silence again settled over the mountains.

"Oh, what is it?" cried Arline, observing the concern of her companions.

"Revolver shooting," answered Tom Gray.

"What do you think, Grace?" whispered Elfreda.

"I fear that Hippy is in trouble," answered Grace, also in a whisper.

"Is—is there nothing that we can do, Loyalheart?"

Grace shook her head slowly, as she listened for further shots.

"Nothing except to protect ourselves," Grace replied. "We may be able to plan a course for action should Hippy not have returned by morning. He has probably lost his way, but we must not worry about that."

"You just said that he is probably in trouble," reminded Miss Briggs.

"Well, isn't losing one's way in the darkness in this region being in trouble?" retorted Grace laughingly.

“You win,” admitted Elfreda. “What now?”

“We must eat. Stacy, you and Tom must watch the camp and see that we are not surprised. While you are eating your supper Tom must stay on guard.”

“My condition will not permit me to stand up for an hour either before or after eating,” responded Stacy.

“Sit right down, Stacy. I will take your watch. Girls, don’t you know that there is a law against cruelty to animals?” demanded Emma. “I cannot understand how you can be so heartless, Grace.”

The laugh at Stacy’s expense relieved the tension and put the Overland girls more at ease. Tom said he would eat at the second table, so he took the watch while Stacy was eating. The fat boy spent fully an hour coiled up in front of a blanket which did duty for him as a table. The others had long since finished and Grace and Emma had gone out to relieve Tom, who confessed that he was ravenously hungry.

“Any news from the front?” questioned Stacy thickly, as Tom came in.

“Children should be seen, not heard,” was Tom’s brief reply. “You are going on watch with me to-night. It is no work for girls. Even

if you do act like a child, this is one of the times when you are going to do your duty like a man. Stacy, listen to me!" commanded Tom sternly. "I have evidence that your pose is not cowardice, but Simon-pure laziness."

"Thanks, Thomas," responded the fat boy dryly. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Strap on your holster and get out there."

Stacy rose, yawned, and, picking up his holster and belt, examined his weapon. "This is a man's job," then announced the fat boy pompously, as he strolled out whistling. "I'll protect this camp, and if any one gets in it will be over my dead body."

"Mercy!" cried Emma in mock alarm. "Oh, do be careful that you do not shoot yourself. Grace, the Overland party is safe now. However, if you hear a shot in the night don't be alarmed. It will be nothing more than Stacy Brown accidentally shooting himself. Then I will pick some wild flowers for you in the morning, little man," she called after him.

"Keep the girls laughing," whispered Grace. "It will take their minds from their troubles."

"Girls, I have to report that the ship is safe. Captain Brown is now on the bridge, and he will guard us until either he goes to sleep at his post or takes himself for a guerrilla and inadvertently shoots himself," announced Miss

Dean. "Thomas, I advise you to go out and make your round of the sentry posts."

"Yes, Tom. I haven't great confidence in Stacy's ability as a guard, but, if you are near to lend him encouragement he may do very well. And now, girls, I suggest that we turn in and get some rest. Stacy will see to it that our rest is not undisturbed. I know him of old," added Grace Harlowe laughingly.

The Overland girls promptly began preparing to turn in, the time being enlivened by merry quips and jests at their expense uttered by Emma Dean. They were soon snuggled under their blankets. None knew what danger menaced them, but all felt that the very atmosphere was charged with possibilities. Nora Wingate, while full of hope that Hippy might come in at any moment, cried silently, covering her head with her blanket lest she utter an audible sob.

Tom had gone out to Stacy to tell the boy what was expected of him, after which the two took up their positions and sat down for their vigil. There was no further conversation between them, and not a sound, save the occasional rustling of leaves near at hand, disturbed that vigil for several hours.

It was shortly after two o'clock in the morning, when Tom Gray, imagining that he had

heard someone moving about, stood up to call out in case it were Stacy. He had barely gotten to his feet when the night was suddenly split by the crash of a heavy revolver within a few yards of him. A bullet snipped the leaves not far from Tom's head.

"I got him! I got him!" howled Stacy Brown, discharging the remaining cartridges in his revolver in quick succession.

"Stop it! You're shooting at me, you idiot!" yelled Tom Gray. Tom was now hugging the ground for self-protection.

"I hit him. He's over yonder. If you don't believe me I'll show you," yelled Stacy triumphantly.

CHAPTER XI

A MESSAGE FROM WILLY

WHILE on watch Stacy Brown had sat down at the base of a stubbed tree, and there he eventually went to sleep. He awakened with a start, and in full consciousness that he had failed in his duty to his companions. Realizing this, Stacy got up and walked a few yards towards the camp, proceeding cautiously so as not to attract the attention of Tom Gray. Entering the deeper shadows cast by a rock, he leaned against it and surveyed as much of the immediate landscape as the darkness permitted.

As Stacy's eyes became more accustomed to the uncertain light he made a sudden and alarming discovery. Outline against the sky near where he had taken his nap he saw that which made him instantly alert.

"A man!" whispered the boy, and without pausing to consider that what he saw might be his companion, Stacy Brown jerked his revolver from its holster and fired. Stacy saw the object at which he was shooting disappear

and fall to the ground, and it was at that juncture that he set up his triumphant yell.

"You nearly hit me, you poor fish!" raged Tom. "Don't you know that I was almost in line with your fire?"

"Have you any bullet holes in you?" demanded the fat boy.

"No. Of course not."

"Then you were not in line with my fire or you would have been hit. I never miss what I shoot at. Hurry! Strike a light. Do something so we can see. I expect we'll find a dead man over there."

Tom produced his pocket lamp and started forward as calls of alarm were heard from the camp.

"It's all right. Stacy has been shooting at shadows," answered Tom.

The girls came running to the scene as Tom stepped towards the spot indicated by Stacy.

"Right there behind that tree stub, Tom," urged the boy, hanging back to permit his companion to reach the scene first.

"There is something there!" cried Tom.

"Of course there is. I—"

"What is it?" demanded Grace and Elfreda breathlessly.

"Nothing of importance. I shot a prowler, that's all," replied Stacy.

"I see a hat," announced Tom. "A hat on the ground, but that's all."

"Are you certain that there isn't a man's head in the hat?" questioned Emma, halting a little way back.

"Fiddlesticks! There wasn't any man to hit. Stacy! Where is your hat?" demanded Tom Gray, fixing a stern look on the fat boy.

"Why, I—I—I guess I must have hung it on a branch of that stub just before I sat down there," stammered the boy, passing a hand over his head. "I forgot all about it. Honest, Tom, I did."

"Huh!" Tom picked up the hat and handed it to him. "You hung your hat on the tree stub, and when you woke up from your beauty sleep you saw the hat and took for granted that the tree wearing it was a man. Oh, what a simp! Are those holes bullet holes?" exploded Tom, playing his light on the hat.

"Yes, of course. Didn't I tell you I hit it?"

"Then you must have aimed at something else," interjected Emma Dean. "Stacy ordinarily hits what he doesn't aim at. The safest spot in the world is the one that he fires at."

"Please let me look at that hat," urged Grace, extending her hand for it. A ray from the lamp had reflected on something inside the sombrero. Stacy surrendered it with some

reluctance, and with more or less suspicion as to Grace Harlowe's intentions regarding it.

"Stacy, did you have anything in this hat?" she demanded after peering into it.

"No, of course not."

"Nothing is right," spoke up Emma, which brought a laugh from her companions.

"Hold your light here, Tom," requested Grace, turning the hat so that a ray from the pocket lamp might light up the inside of the hat. "There is a piece of paper tucked partly under the inside hat band," she said.

"Let me have it!" demanded the fat boy.

"Just a moment, please. I wish you people to take a good look at this," continued Grace. "You will observe that there are three bullet holes in Stacy's sombrero, each one going through the hat and coming out the other side. Note well the position of the piece of paper."

After each had taken the look requested, Grace handed the hat to Tom with a nod. Tom took the piece of paper from the inside band and regarded it inquiringly under the light, the Overlanders pressing about him wondering what new mystery was about to be revealed to them.

"Hm-m-m!" mused Captain Gray after a quick glance at the paper. "This is a message for us, and another mysterious one. Listen,"

he directed. "I'll read it. It begins 'Friends,' and reads as follows:

" 'You are in great danger and should not have attempted to follow this trail, or the trail you started out on. There are guerrillas not far from you, but if you will keep close watch you can hold them off until others are ready to act. Stay where you are. Don't break camp until you are told to.' The signature," added Tom Gray, "is the same as on the other mysterious note that we received. The man calls himself 'Willy.' "

"How strange!" murmured Grace. "We at least know now where we stand and must govern ourselves accordingly. I wonder who it can be. Whoever it is we know that he is our friend, and had we taken his advice we should not be in this predicament. He says not a word about Lemuel or Hippy, but perhaps he doesn't know they are missing."

"There is one thing that I do not understand," spoke up Elfreda. "I don't think you all got what Grace meant when she requested you to take a good look at the position of the piece of paper in the hat. The peculiar thing about it is that the paper was right over one of Stacy's bullet holes, and that there is no bullet hole through the paper itself. Now will you wise Overlanders explain that?"

"Why, don't you know?" cried Emma. "Stacy's bullets are trained bullets. They aren't supposed to hurt anyone. They just tickle what they hit and then fly up into the ether. Like Stacy himself, they are crazy but harmless."

"There is only one explanation that I can think of," Miss Briggs declared. "The paper must have been placed in the hat after the shooting, and when the hat was on the ground. There was a man there then. Stacy did see someone after all. The man plainly dropped to the ground at the first shot, and when the hat fell down he quickly slipped his message in it. I will say that he is about the coolest-headed person I've ever heard of."

"Get back to camp," ordered Tom. "Stacy and I will finish what we began, and to-morrow morning I am going out to look for Hippy."

Tom flashed his light about, raising it from the ground for the first time, but no sooner had he done so than there came the *wo-o-o-o* and the *spang* of a bullet as it flattened itself against a rock at some little distance from them.

"Put out your light!" cried Emma shrilly.

Tom, instead of throwing off the light, let the lamp fall from his hand and yelled "Down!"

CHAPTER XII

A NARROW ESCAPE

THE girls of the Overland party were flat on the ground ere Tom Gray had obeyed his own command. Five bullets whined overhead and sang on into the far distance.

"Too high! You'll have to do better than that," jeered Stacy Brown. "The faster they come the higher they get."

"That is a heavy rifle, and the shots were fired from a distance," announced Tom.

"I think the light attracted the shots," suggested Grace.

"Yes, I think so," said Tom. "No more lights outside of camp, and no more in it than absolutely necessary. The excitement is all over for this evening, I hope. I think—"

"Look out! Duck!" yelled Stacy Brown, and once more he began shooting, to the amazement and consternation of his companions.

"Doan' shoot! Ah ain't done nothin'," wailed a frightened voice from the darkness ahead of them.

"Stop it!" commanded Tom Gray, who, with the girls, had once more dropped to the ground.

"It's Lemuel!" cried Emma. "St. Petersburg, is that you?"

"Ah reckons Ah doan' know. Ah reckons mah haid ain't got nothin' but bumps onto it. Doan' shoot no moah, I arsk you-all."

Tom Gray was already bounding forward towards the sound of the little guide's voice.

"St. Petersburg! Now perhaps we shall hear news of Hippy. Are you all right, Lemuel?" begged Tom anxiously.

"Ain't nevah goin' to be all right no moah, Cap'n. Mah haid feels like mah face did when Ah had er mumps."

"You poor boy! You come right along with me and let me see what is the matter with you," commanded Miss Briggs, grasping the arm of the little colored boy and leading him rapidly towards the camp, followed by the others of the party.

"Hadn't Stacy better stay on watch?" questioned Grace.

"No. It isn't safe to leave him alone. Should Hippy chance to come in Stacy surely will shoot him," answered Tom.

"Shoot at him, you mean," corrected Emma.

Tom said he would return to his post, but that he first wished to question Lemuel.

"Oh, you poor boy!" cried Nora when they got the boy to the camp and had had a good look at him. Lemuel's face was scratched and swollen, and three big lumps on his head bore evidence to as many cruel blows.

"Have you had anything to eat to-day?" demanded Elfreda, observing that the boy was weak, and that his body sagged as if it were about to collapse.

"Ah doan' know, Missie—Ah doan' know when Ah had er snack to eat. Ain't had no appertite nohow."

Grace and Emma sprang to the fire, and in a few moments had tea over the coals. While they were thus engaged Nora was preparing food for the boy and Elfreda was examining his wounds and washing away the congealed blood from his head and face.

"This boy has had some terrific blows on his head. It is a wonder that he is alive," declared Miss Briggs. "Please hurry, girls."

Lemuel found his appetite when the odor of food assailed his nostrils, and when it was placed before him he ate so ravenously that Miss Briggs threatened to take it away from him unless he ate more slowly. This slowed him up somewhat, and after he had eaten all they would let him have, Lemuel suddenly straightened up and rolled his eyes.

"Mah hat! Mah hat! Ah done lost mah hat," he wailed.

"Lieutenant Wingate found your hat, Lemuel," Grace informed him.

"Whar dat—whar dat hat?" cried St. Petersburg, springing up.

"Sit down," commanded Elfreda. "I must treat your bumps, and while I am doing so you must tell Captain Gray what happened to you. When you have finished you shall have what is left of your hat."

"Speak up, and be lively about it," urged Tom. "Who hit you?"

"Ah doan' know. Ah was down thar lookin', thinkin' Ah'd seen somebody, when er feller grabbed me. Ah tried ter yell, but Ah didn't, cause he give me er clip on de bean, an Ah went ter sleep. I waked up, den I tried ter git away and got another clip on de bean."

"What happened then?" questioned Captain Gray.

"Doan' know nuffin' 'bout dat. When Ah waked up agin Ah was in er cave, and er feller wid er gun was keepin' watch ovah me and mah haid ached and Ah was sore all ovah. Who do you reckons did dat t'ing, Boss?" The colored boy rolled the whites of his eyes up to Tom.

"That is what we wish to find out, Lemuel. How many men did you see?"

“ ’Bout er hundred, Ah reckons.”

“Are you positive?” interrupted Emma.

“Are you sure?”

“Ain’t sure ’bout nuffin’ ’cept mah haid.”

“Did you see Lieutenant Wingate?”

Lemuel shook his head.

“Whar he?”

“He is missing, just as you were. How did you get away from them and how did you find your way here?”

“Two fellers got ter fightin’ and Ah runned away. Ah seen yer light and Ah heard you-all shootin’ and Ah comed in. Ah runned away last night and Ah been tryin’ ter find you-all ever since.”

“Were the men who captured you Mexicans?” asked Elfreda.

Lemuel said he didn’t know.

“Put the boy to bed. Perhaps when his head is clearer in the morning he may be able to recall more of what happened to him. Whether he can do so or not, I am going out to look for Hippy,” announced Captain Gray. “It is plain now that Hippy has gotten into trouble. I wish Mr. Belden were here. Turn in, you folks. Stacy, you come with me. The camp must not be left unguarded.”

Nothing occurred that night to disturb the quiet of the Overland camp from that moment

on. Daylight found Tom Gray still on guard, but Stacy Brown lay stretched out on the ground sound asleep. The girls were stirring when Tom walked into camp, leaving Stacy to finish his sleep.

“Call the boy after I have eaten breakfast,” directed Tom.

Lemuel was awakened shortly after that, and as soon as convenient Tom took him out where a view of the surrounding country was to be had, and questioned him as to what part of the country he thought he had been taken to. About all that the boy was able to do was here and there to point out some landmark that he had observed when trying to find his way back to his party the day before. It served, however, to give Tom an idea of the general direction that he wanted to know. He reasoned that if Lemuel had come that way it were safe to assume that Hippy had gone that way.

“I am going, but, should I not return to-night, don’t be alarmed. Should I not come up with Hippy I’ll keep going until I do, at least until some time late to-morrow. I surely shall be back by or shortly after dark to-morrow. Grace, have you packed my rations?” demanded Tom.

She handed a fairly heavy pack to him,

which Tom hung over one shoulder, then kissing Grace good-bye he picked up his rifle and started off. Stacy was still sleeping when the Overlander passed out on his way resolute and unafraid.

St. Petersburg spent most of his morning trying to press his wrecked plug hat back into shape, but without success. No work was demanded of him, so the boy had an easy time of it. A lookout was posted immediately after breakfast and continued all day, the girls taking turns in watching that the camp might not be surprised. Later on, Grace and Elfreda sought to stimulate the colored boy's memory of what had occurred to him during his absence, but, beyond what he already had told them, they elicited nothing new. St. Petersburg plainly had been so dazed from the blows on his head that he had practically no recollection left.

The day wore on and night came on with all plans made for protecting the camp. It was decided that Arline should remain in her tent and go to sleep while all the rest of the party stood guard, including Lemuel and Stacy, to both of whom a severe lecture was read by Miss Briggs on the necessity of keeping awake and being ever on the alert.

The vigil was taken up by the entire party, with the exception of Arline, early in the eve-

ning, the members of the party being so placed that the entire camp was surrounded. There was to be no moving about except as Grace, at intervals, made the rounds of the watchers to see that all was well with them. She made her first round exactly at midnight. Then the long dreary hours until daylight were faced with anxiety. The absence of Tom and Hippy made a great difference, and the feeling of confidence that had been inspired by these men no longer existed.

Grace Harlowe's next round was made two hours later, when she found each girl on duty wide awake and alert. On her way back to her own post, Grace paused and peered intently at the one tent in the camp that she could see from her position. Only the upper half of it was visible, faintly lighted by the glowing embers of the campfire.

"I thought I saw a shadow on that tent. I wonder if Arline is up," reflected Grace, "I—Ah!" A human head in silhouette, for a brief second, stood out on the canvas of the tent, and then disappeared.

Grace crept up cautiously, but to her dismay a dead branch snapped under her foot so loudly that she feared it would attract the attention of her companions. There was now no need for secrecy in approaching the camp-site, so

Grace stepped briskly forward, rounded a huge boulder that lay between her and the tents, then halted and gazed wonderingly at the scene before her.

The camp showed no signs of life.

"Arline!" called the Overland girl softly.

There was no response. After listening intently Grace distinctly heard the regular breathing of Arline Thayer who plainly was asleep. Grace peered into the tent and in the faint light the figure of the sleeping girl was faintly discernible.

"Arline!" she again called softly.

Arline answered sleepily, then settled back into an even sounder sleep, whereupon Grace stepped back, drawing the tent flaps together, and looked about her, a growing suspicion in her eyes.

Stepping to a tent that had been occupied by men of their party, Grace made a discovery. The tent flaps that had been wide open when last she was in the camp were now tightly drawn.

An instant's hesitation, then she drew the flaps apart ever so little and peered in. The tent-flaps were as quickly closed, and Grace stepped hurriedly back a few paces.

"Overlanders!" she shouted in a tone that brought her companions running to the scene.

CHAPTER XIII

JUANA, THE MYSTERIOUS

THE Overland girls came on flying feet from their posts in response to Grace Harlowe's call. They found her standing back several yards from the closed tent, with one hand on her holster.

"Wha—wha dis?" stammered Lemuel, rolling his eyes.

"Grace! For mercy sake, what has happened?" cried Emma, flushed and excited.

A cry from Arline Thayer's tent told them that she was now awake, but no one gave heed to her.

"What is it?" questioned Miss Briggs unemotionally. "I do not see anything to get excited about."

"Look at that tent," answered Grace.

"Well? I fail to see anything wrong with it. What is the big idea?"

"Girls, did you observe when you left here that the flaps of that tent were open?" asked Grace.

The girls shook their heads.

"The flap was closed when I came here just now—keep a little to one side, all of you. If I have to shoot I want a clear field."

"If there is shooting to be done I am the **man** to attend to that," spoke up Stacy Brown pompously.

Grace waved him back.

"Do you mean to say that some person has been in this camp since we left it?" wondered Elfreda.

"Yes. There is someone in that tent now," replied Grace with more calmness than she felt.

"Help!" murmured Emma. "Stacy, go in and see who it is."

"I will not. My place is out here with you girls," answered the fat boy.

"Yes, little boy. You are right. I think—"

"Please all stand to one side—on one side, I mean," commanded Grace. "I am going to find out. Be ready for trouble."

Grace stepped up to the tent and flung wide the flaps, with revolver at ready. She paused momentarily, then stepped in.

"Get up, whoever you are! I have a gun and I know how to use it," warned Grace.

There was a movement under the blanket beneath which the intruder had taken refuge. The blanket was slowly cast aside, and the oc-

cupant of the tent sat up, the Overland girl's revolver leveled at the stranger's head.

As she gazed, Grace slowly lowered the weapon, and let it drop into its holster.

"Come out where I can get a good look at you," she ordered, taking the visitor by an arm and starting for the open. "Look, girls!" she cried. "What do you think of our caller?"

"A girl!" gasped Nora Wingate.

"Yes, a girl, and a pretty one, too," answered Grace, standing off and gazing at the intruder.

The intruder did not appear to be more than fifteen years old. She was dark, with the black eyes and the features of a Mexican, but she was pretty and rather delicate-looking.

"You will now please explain what you are doing in our camp," demanded Grace.

"A thousand pardons, Señorita. Juana did not know. She thought there was no one here but the girl in the other tent. I meant no harm. I swear it by the Mother of us all and all the saints," cried the girl, dropping to her knees, hands upraised in a gesture of supplication. Her distress appeared so genuine that the Overland girls' sympathies went out to her. Still, her presence in their camp needed explaining.

"You say your name is Juana. Where do

you live?" questioned Elfreda, regarding the girl with steady, searching eyes.

"I live in the mountains in a cabin far from here, I fear. My father is a *vaquero*, and he will die of grief when I do not come home to-night. Oh, señoritas, what shall I do?"

"That depends. How did you chance to come here at this time of night?" continued Miss Briggs.

"I wandered into a part of the hills that was new to me, and darkness overtook me. I could not find my way, and when I saw a light I came here. Finding only one woman I thought to creep into the tent where I knew I should be warm, and find rest. I was so cold, Señorita."

"Yes, but how did you get in here?" wondered Miss Dean.

"Why, I walked in. How did you think I came?" returned Juana, raising her troubled black eyes to Emma's face.

Emma shrugged her shoulders.

"It seems that our barrage of Overland Riders was not as hole-proof as we thought it was," she said.

"Where did you learn to speak such good English?" asked Grace.

"I went to school in El Paso where I was born, Señorita."

"One question more, Juana. How long had you been here when I entered the camp?"

"Very, very long, Señorita. I think an hour or more."

"And you have been in the tent ever since—up to the time I dragged you out?" asked Grace smilingly.

"Yes, Señorita. I was too cold to want to come out."

"Thank you. Girls, suppose we make some tea for the señorita. She must be hungry, too. Stacy! You and Lemuel go out and stand watch for an hour, but don't shoot before you stop to think."

Juana's spirits rose under the influence of tea and biscuit, and she talked with less restraint, asking many questions, where the party came from, where they were going and how long they were to be in the mountains. Juana also questioned them as to why they did not have a man with them. Fortunately for her, Stacy Brown was not at hand to hear the remark. Stacy and Lemuel were a few yards away, pacing back and forth, peering into the darkness.

Only one of the Overlanders gave Juana definite information. Nora Wingate in her eagerness to get news of Hippy told all she knew about the affairs and the disasters of the

party, to which the visitor listened with glowing eyes.

A little later, Juana said she would like to lie down and get some rest, being very tired after her long wandering in the mountains. After seeing the little Mexican girl to bed in the tent where she had taken refuge, the flaps were closed and hooked together, and the Overland girls looked at each other inquiringly.

"Well, what do you think about it?" demanded Emma.

Elfreda laid a finger on her own lips and nodded towards the tent.

"We must go back and take up our vigil," announced Grace. "Juana will sleep better, too, if she doesn't hear us chattering. Come, girls! One of us will remain here to see that our guest is not disturbed. I think I shall do that myself. Come!"

After a word to Arline to reassure her that all was well, the girls walked from the camp, halting a few yards beyond, and stood there talking.

"What do you think of her, Elfreda?" asked Grace.

"A pretty girl, isn't she?" answered Miss Briggs.

"Keep a sharp lookout. You take charge of the girls. I will stand watch in camp. I have

my own reasons for wishing to do so, and for goodness' sake don't let any more prowlers get through. I don't understand yet how that Mexican girl got in. I know very well that she did not get by me. No one could do that without discovery."

Grace accompanied the girls to their stations, all chatting in low tones. Stacy reported "All's well"; then Grace returned to camp, and peered into Arline's tent, where she found Miss Thayer awake, but drowsy.

"Do you think everything is all right?" murmured Arline sleepily.

"Yes. Now forget everything but sleep, and in a few moments you will forget that, too. Good-night."

After closing the flaps of Arline's tent, Grace stepped over and peered into the tent occupied by Juana. The girl was snuggled under her blanket, breathing evenly and evidently asleep, so the Overland Rider went out and sat down by the fire to think and to watch. She was not yet satisfied that all was right, so far as their guest was concerned. Then there was the added worry over Lieutenant Wingate and Tom Gray, though Grace felt a supreme confidence that both men would extricate themselves from whatever predicament they might have gotten into, and she also felt confident

that the members of the party left in camp could take care of themselves.

Nothing further occurred to disturb the serenity of the night, nor was there a sound to be heard from the girls and the boys on guard duty. The quiet continued uninterrupted for more than an hour, and then Grace, finding herself sleepy, got up and moved about, taking care not to awaken the sleepers in the tents. After a while she peeped into the tent occupied by the Mexican girl, and saw something there that did not seem to be right, though the shadows were so deep that the Overlander could not see anything in detail. Grace stepped lightly to the blankets and, crouching down, uttered a sudden exclamation.

The Overlander bounded from the tent, and running out into the open, shouted to her companions.

"Look out! Juana has run away! Catch her! Don't let her get by you!" cried Grace.

Excitement followed Grace's warning shout, and in a moment she had joined the girls to search for their late guest, though not before Stacy Brown in his excitement had fired his revolver into the air.

"Stop that!" commanded Miss Briggs.

"Keep going, girls. We musn't let that young woman get away from us," cried Emma.

"There's something wrong here. What's that?"

A sudden scream startled the girls.

"It's Arline! Run!" wailed Nora.

The Overlanders with one accord deserted their posts and ran full speed for the camp, followed by Stacy Brown and a badly frightened Lemuel. A further cry from Arline, shriller and full of fear, speeded up the sprinters. They entered the camp in a rush, Stacy stumbling over a tent-rope into the camp fire, from which he hastily extricated himself.

Emma was the first to reach Arline's tent, followed by Elfreda who was close on her heels. Both girls dashed into Arline's tent at the same instant, calling out her name and demanding to know the cause of her screams.

Emma and Elfreda were out of the tent in a flash.

"She's gone! Arline's gone!" cried Elfreda, bumping into Grace Harlowe in her haste.

"Quick! Spread out!" commanded Grace. "Don't shoot unless attacked. Arline! Shout so we may know where you are!"

A quickly smothered scream, seemingly far away, answered Grace Harlowe's hail.

CHAPTER XIV

HIPPY FINDS A HOT TRAIL

IT was nearly night when Lieutenant Wingate, after much difficulty and many false leads, finally found the trail that seemed to be the one over which Lemuel had been taken by his captors.

Hippy straightened up and took a final survey of the country, fixing every prominent landmark in his mind before turning back towards camp, for he could do little more that day, and the trail would still be there in the morning.

“This is a fine kettle of fish,” he growled.

Something rustled a bush not more than a dozen yards from him, and the Overland Rider turned like a flash and drew his weapon, when he saw the cause of the disturbance was a swarthy Mexican. The fellow's arm was raised and, with head tilted slightly backward, he was aiming his revolver directly at Lieutenant Wingate, but Hippy's quick move had, for a few lucky seconds, disconcerted the man and stayed his trigger-finger.

Lieutenant Wingate's own weapon came up, and at the same instant he sprang to one side, firing as he leaped. Both weapons banged so close together that it sounded like the report of one gun.

"Hands up!" shouted Hippy.

The answer was another shot, but the Overlander was hopping about like a jumping-jack, making the Mexican's aim uncertain and causing his bullets to go wild. Hippy, as he jumped, gave back shot for shot, his adversary quickly adopting similar tactics, but having the advantage that there was a heavy growth of bushes through which he could dodge, while Hippy Wingate had but a scattering growth to mask his own activities.

Both men emptied their revolvers without scoring a hit, then threw themselves on the ground where they quickly reloaded. Hippy, however, instead of rising and resuming the battle, wriggled his way over the ground, then on all fours he crept along at a fair rate of speed. He paused now and then to listen and look, but as the light was failing he could not see far. In order to get a clearer view he began cautiously to raise himself. It was then that the end came. A crushing blow on the head, a struggle to recover himself, and then darkness as the Overlander sank back unconscious.

What hit him Lieutenant Wingate never knew, but later on he recalled a jolting journey, dimly realized at the time. His awakening came late in the night, and when consciousness returned he heard the low murmur of conversation that seemed to come from some distance.

For some time Lieutenant Wingate lay back trying to recover his strength, for he felt weak and nauseated. He finally reached for his weapons, but found them missing. The Overlander next began feeling about in an effort to discover his location. His ultimate conclusion was that he was in a cave.

"Some coward slammed me on the head," complained Hippy. "I must have deserved it for I shouldn't have permitted the fellow to get close to me. I must look for a way out of this hole."

The Overland Rider felt his way along with extreme care. He found that the further he went in one direction the more plainly he could hear the conversation that at first had been only a distant murmur. This told him that he was proceeding in the right direction. The cave soon narrowed into a low-roofed tunnel. Hippy discovered that fact when his sore head came into contact with the roof. The pain from the impact caused him to sit down suddenly.

After a time the Overlander got up, and with

a hand held above his head he felt his way along. All at once he found himself in the open. He could see the sky and the stars, but noticed that the voices he had been hearing were suddenly stilled.

Hippy paused in a listening attitude, head thrust forward, with fists ready to meet an attack. A violent blow on the head once more laid Lieutenant Wingate flat on the ground, and there he lay on his face. Of what happened after that he had no knowledge, and when finally he awakened it was broad daylight. Hippy was bound hand and foot—hog-tied, as the expression goes in the west. His throat was parched and the pain in his head nearly drove him frantic. A dense growth of mesquite surrounded him, and beyond it he could see the tall pines. There was nothing to indicate that there was a person within miles of him.

Hippy rested for the better part of an hour before attempting to move.

“Hello!” he shouted.

There was no response.

“I suppose I have been left here to die, but I’m not ready to go just now. I can roll home if I can’t get there any other way.” He thereupon proceeded to roll. It was terrible work. The Overland Rider’s clothing was torn and

his whole body was smarting from scratches when he finally paused to rest. Then he started on again, but halted abruptly.

Standing within a few feet of Lieutenant Wingate stood a much behatted, bespurred and bespangled Mexican, with hands resting on his hips, a sneer curling his lips.

"Hello!" greeted the captive. "Glad to see you, and now, if you will remove the rope, I shall be glad to stretch my nether extremities."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

"Are you going to release me?" demanded the Overlander with some irritation in his voice.

"No, Señor. It is not for me to say."

"Then get someone who has the authority to do so. I give you my word that unless I am released at once someone will die for this outrage," threatened Hippy, but his warning appeared to make no impression on the man before him, who merely shook his head. A second man came along at this juncture, an evil-faced, beady-eyed individual who reminded Hippy of Carlos Gonzales without his oily smile.

A brief consultation ensued, following which the Mexicans each grabbed a foot of the captive and began dragging him through the bushes.

"Here, here!" yelled Hippy. "You bounders! I'm not ready to be taken out feet first."

Despite his protestations they continued to drag him through the mesquite where he got more scratches. Reaching an open spot the men roughly threw him under a tree. The ground was softer there and proportionately more comfortable. Hippy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Water!" begged the captive.

He was rewarded with laughter, as the men strode away and sat down at some distance from him, and began speaking in their own tongue.

"I know now what a guerrilla is," groaned Lieutenant Wingate. "I hope I meet one of them one of these days on equal footing."

Hippy now found himself wondering why he and Lemuel had been chosen for attack by the guerrillas, but reasoned that it was out of revenge for the treatment that Carlos Gonzales had had in the Overland camp.

The Overlander's train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of a third man, also a Mexican. He was booted and spurred and bejewelled above the common variety of *vaquero*, and from the way he addressed Hippy's guards the Overlander decided that he was a person

in authority. This impression was confirmed when the newcomer dismounted and stalked over to the captive, whom he greeted with a sweeping bow and a superior smile.

"I'd be obliged if you would leave out the trimmings and give me something to eat," reminded Lieutenant Wingate.

"The Señor has not dined?" questioned the newcomer, in mock surprise.

"Dined! Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one. I will confess that I did chew up a few green leaves this morning, but dine? I've forgotten how. When am I to be released?"

"When the Señor is dead he will be free to go when and where he will."

"Get out, you crepe-hanger!"

The Mexican laughed and walked away, beckoning to the other two men to follow. He halted at a short distance from Hippy and then berated the first two Mexicans in his own tongue. The captive, while he could not understand what was being said, knew that it was an argument—a one-sided one, too—and he was delighted, regretting only that he could not add his voice to that of the Mexican dandy. The latter finally drove the men towards their camp-fire, gesticulating and threatening with every step.

"I reckon he was telling them to get him

something to eat," reflected the Overland Rider, narrowly watching the preparations for cooking. "I hope I don't smell it. If I do I surely shall have hydrophobia."

Coffee was made, and then there was some cooking over the fire, but Hippy was not in position to determine just what they were cooking. He saw the Mexican dandy make a gesture towards him, and after a parting bombardment of words the fellow mounted and rode away.

"He ordered them to get dinner for me!" cried Lieutenant Wingate. "Well, well. He isn't half the savage I thought he was. Hurry up with that chuck, you lazy *vaqueros!*" he called, as he saw them coming.

One man bore a coffee pot, the other a handful of bacon. The face of each wore a heavy scowl.

"Give me that food, quick. Turn your faces the other way. They spoil my appetite. Stop it!"

The man with the bacon had thrust a large chunk into Hippy's mouth and pushed it as far down as his finger would reach, and the Overlander's thoughts were divided between rage at the manner of feeding him and joy at tasting food in his mouth. One piece after another was fed to him in quick succession un-

til his cheeks stuck out. By this time he was beyond words, and could only grunt his disapproval and try to roll away from his torturers. His efforts were futile.

Hippy now having all the bacon in his mouth, the man with the coffee pot and a tin cup stepped up, the other fellow giving way and taking up a position at the captive's feet where he could watch the coffee-drinking. It was not exactly drinking, for the man tipped the cup and poured its contents full into the mouth of the Overland Rider.

The victim yelled, for the coffee was hot, while the Mexican at his feet sitting on his haunches was rocking back and forth howling with delight. He forgot that the captive had feet, but was forcibly reminded of it a moment later, when Lieutenant Wingate, quickly recognizing his opportunity, brought both roped feet up with all the force he could muster. The toes caught the Mexican under the chin and bowled him over backwards. The fellow lay where he had fallen for a few seconds, considerably dazed, then staggering to his feet he fixed his blazing black eyes on the face of the Overland Rider.

"Señor! For that you die!" The last word trailed off into a long-drawn, sibilant hiss, as the Mexican's hand slipped to his holster.

CHAPTER XV

A VOICE FROM THE SHADOWS

“STOP it, you fool!” thundered Lieutenant Wingate.

The Mexican, startled, hesitated, then jerked his weapon out. The brief pause, however, gave the man's companion time to act. The latter leaped forward, shouting to the irate *vaquero* to stop, and hurling himself between Lieutenant Wingate and the weapon. For a few seconds it looked as if the men would end by shooting each other up, and accusations were exchanged between them at machine-gun speed, finally resulting in the angry Mexican shrugging his shoulders and turning away.

“*Mañana!*” he raged, casting a malignant glance over his shoulder at Hippy.

“Thank you, old man,” grinned the Overlander, nodding to the peace-maker. “That was a close call. That other fellow acts mad about something.”

“Señor, it is not to save you, but that there are others who must talk to you alive. To talk to a dead man is nothing. I could keel you my-

self just like this," and the fellow, drawing his weapon, went through in pantomime the motions of putting the Overland Rider to death. "I hate you. See! I kick you!" He gave Hippy a violent kick on the shin that brought a howl from the captive. The man then strode away and joined his companion.

"Whew!" exclaimed Hippy. "What a blood-thirsty lot! I wondered why that ruffian was so eager to spare my life but now I know. I am to be handed over to the mercies of some other fellow, who I presume may be Gonzales. I hope he comes around soon. This suspense is heart-breaking."

While the ruffians appeared to give no further heed to their captive, Hippy observed that the men remained where they could see him, and spent much of their time in pacing back and forth. They gave him nothing more to eat that day, nor did he ask for food. Once was enough.

The hours dragged wearily on, and Lieutenant Wingate found himself getting numb all over because the rope that bound him had been drawn tightly about his body. He looked forward to the night with apprehension, fearing that the man that he had kicked might decide to finish him with a knife, with which all Mexicans are quite handy. The Overlander was

thankful that he was not gagged. Now he could yell, which he decided to do if he saw anyone approaching.

A bright fire was built by Hippy's captors as soon as night fell, a much larger fire than was necessary Hippy thought, which told him that these men plainly were not in fear of discovery. Their camp was in a remote part of the mountains where few persons passed, and, though he did not know it, was on the direct trail to the Border, the trail of smugglers and renegades going from the States to Mexico or *vice versa*.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when the captive saw the two men sit up and listen. Not long after that he heard something that sounded like a body of horsemen approaching.

"I reckon this must be the party that is coming to interview me, but somehow I don't fancy meeting him," reflected the captive.

A single horseman rode into the camp. Upon receiving a nod from the two men he uttered a shrill whistle, and a few moments later a party of horsemen rode in.

The captive partly raised himself on one elbow and gazed eagerly at the newcomers. They were all Mexicans, with the exception of one white man, whom Lieutenant Wingate instantly recognized.

"So, that is the game, is it?" muttered the

Overland Rider. "I don't believe I care to meet him in the present circumstances."

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"Who said that?" demanded Hippy. A voice, it seemed, had come out of the air, or was it his own imagining?

"Not a word, Lieutenant!"

"Eh? Who are you?" demanded Lieutenant Wingate sharply.

"Never mind who I am. Is there anyone near you?"

Hippy said that there was not. A faint rustling sound reached his ears, and a few seconds later he saw a crouching human form stealing up to him. As the man came closer the Overlander saw that he wore a handkerchief over his face below the eyes.

"Are you tied?" whispered the mysterious one.

"Of course I am. You don't think I'd be hanging around here if I could get away, do you?"

There was no reply, but the hands of the newcomer began running over the captive's body.

"Hog-tied!" muttered the man, severing the rope that bound Hippy. "Do you think you can walk a short distance?"

The Overland Rider said he didn't know, but

that there was little or no feeling in his limbs. His rescuer said he would assist him, but warned Hippy not to stand upright until they had got some distance away.

"We will have to hurry. What were they going to do with you?"

"I don't know. The worst, I reckon."

"Not a word more. They're coming for you!" exclaimed the rescuer.

Hippy found that his limbs threatened to let him down the instant he threw his weight upon them, but his companion gripped him by an arm and assisted him along as rapidly as possible. Hippy found himself marveling that a human being could tread so lightly as did the man at his side. Behind them they could already hear shouts and knew that the escape had been discovered. After a time the shouts grew fainter and finally ceased altogether.

"They've hit the wrong trail," announced the rescuer grimly. "The danger isn't over yet. We must hurry on for some distance."

"Buddy, I'm afraid my underpinning won't hold out unless I first take a rest. Is it far?" begged the Overlander.

"That depends upon how much dodging we have to do." The rescuer thereupon struck off abruptly to the right, proceeding in that direction for some fifteen minutes, then halting.

"Well?" demanded Hippy.

"Hide yourself here. Lie down and get what rest you can. Hungry?"

"No. Just starved, that's all. What do you propose to do?"

"I have a horse at some distance from here. I'll fetch it and we will ride out."

After leaving a revolver with Lieutenant Wingate and giving him a few squares of hardtack the rescuer started to leave. In reply to an inquiry as to what his name was, he told Hippy that he might call him "Bud." The Overlander sat down heavily, well secreted in a thicket of shrubbery and attacked the hardtack ravenously. It was a delicious morsel to a man who had gone without food for so long, and, for the time being, led him to forget the pain in his limbs.

"Bud" had said that he probably would not return for an hour, so Hippy composed himself by lying flat on his back and gazing up at the stars, and in his exhaustion soon fell asleep with a cake of hardtack in his hand. His slumbers were suddenly aroused by a sound. He thought he heard a horse approaching, and got to his feet to listen.

"It is a horse! I must have been asleep. Either I have had a long nap or Bud has made a quick trip."



Hippy Pulled the Trigger.

A rider loomed up in the darkness. Discovering the Overlander almost as quickly as Hippy saw him, he reined in.

"Hello, Bud! Is that you?" called Hippy.

"Yes. Who are you?" came back the answer in a muffled voice that did not sound at all familiar to Lieutenant Wingate.

"I'm Wingate."

"Come here," directed the horseman.

"Wha—at's the matter?" stammered Hippy, a vague feeling of uneasiness creeping over him. He stepped forward, however, his confidence strengthened by the weapon that lay in his hand, and, approaching the horse cautiously, peered up at the rider.

"You aren't Bud!" cried the Overlander. Hippy made a move to leap back, but he was not quick enough to avoid a swinging blow from the loaded crop that the rider brought down on him. As the crop swung towards his head, Hippy pulled the trigger of his weapon, staggered a few feet and collapsed at the instant that half a dozen other horsemen came up. One of their horses had gone down under his shot, which went wild.

Ere the first man and the others who had joined him had recovered from the surprise that Lieutenant Wingate's shot gave them, a perfect fusillade of revolver shots was poured

into them, fired from one side and over the spot where Hippy lay. The ruffians fled precipitately, pursued by a lone horseman, now shooting with an automatic rifle whose heavy reports made their scattering replies with revolvers seem trifling. It was some moments later when the solitary horseman came trotting back to the scene of the attack. By this time Hippy Wingate had recovered consciousness and was sitting up holding his head.

"Lieutenant, are you there?" called the horseman. "This is Bud."

"That's what the other fellow said," groaned Hippy. "Come easy."

The Overlander heard his rescuer laugh, and warned him that he had a revolver.

"Lieutenant, you have killed a horse tonight. Isn't that enough?"

"All right. Come on. I recognize your voice now," invited Hippy.

Bud joined him immediately and assisted Hippy to his feet, the Overlander being still dizzy from the blow he had received.

"I followed those fellows in, but didn't think they would discover you. You can tell me about it later. Let's have a look about, then we will get out of here," said Bud.

They found two horses, left by the fleeing men, one animal dead on the ground, the other

hitched to the dead one's saddle by a lead rope, standing with head down, unmindful of what was going on about him.

"There's a man on that animal!" suddenly exclaimed Bud.

"A man?" wondered Hippy.

"Yes. Hog-tied, as you were, and gagged—a white man," answered Bud, springing forward and slitting the ropes that bound the man, and gently removing the gag from his mouth.

It was too dark to distinguish the captive's features, nor did he utter a sound. He might have been unconscious. Bud saw that he was not dead.

"There, pard, you will be all right in a few minutes," comforted the rescuer.

"He won't if he's had a clip on the head same as I got—" began Hippy.

"Hippy!" It was a weak wail from the man they had just released, and it startled Lieutenant Wingate into instant alertness.

"Who—wha—at?"

"It's Tom—Tom Gray. Do—on't you know me?"

"For the love of Mike!" cried Lieutenant Hippy Wingate.

CHAPTER XVI

A WARNING THAT WAS HEEDED

“SPREAD out and be ready for trouble!” cried Grace Harlowe, following Arline Thayer’s disappearance and her agonized cry.

The Overland girls, pocket lamps in hand, and weapons at ready, dashed into the mesquite, calling out Arline’s name as they ran. A weak cry answered them, which served to give them the direction in which Arline had disappeared. There followed a rush, with Stacy and Lemuel bringing up the rear, as usual, Stacy waving his revolver to the imminent peril of his companions, the colored boy gripping a club with which he had armed himself.

Three quick shots somewhere ahead startled the Overland party. The third shot was followed by the yell of a man.

“Arline!” shouted Grace.

“He—ere,” answered Miss Thayer in a moan.

“There she is. Oh, Arline!” cried Miss Briggs. They were at her side in a moment.

"Are you hurt?" demanded Grace, grasping the girl by an arm and lifting her up.

Stacy, seeing no immediate reason for being frightened, began thrashing about in search of the cause of the disturbance, with St. Petersburg Johnson slightly in advance, eagerly looking for trouble.

"I—I don't know. Oh, Grace! It was terrible. I—"

"Never mind now. You shall tell us all about it after you have composed yourself," soothed Grace, starting to lead her towards camp. Arline, however, insisted on talking, which she did hysterically.

"I heard shouting, and thought I heard a shot," she said. "A girl rushed into my tent saying we were attacked and begging me to run. I ran with her. We hadn't gone far before two men grabbed us. I don't know what happened after that except that she seemed to be trying to get away, but they held us and said we weren't to be harmed, but that we must come with them, and that, if we didn't obey, they had orders to take us. I think the girl knew them. There was something queer about it. When I screamed she held her hand over my mouth. Grace, what does it mean?"

"Were the men Mexicans?" questioned Miss Briggs.

Arline said she didn't know.

"There were shots fired somewhere near you. Did you see who did that?" persisted Elfreda.

"No. The men ran away when the shots were fired, and I think one of them was hit. Who do you suppose did that? Was it one of you girls?" begged Arline, looking from one face to another.

"Not unless Lemuel shot at them with his club," chuckled Emma Dean. "Lemuel is always in harmony with his environment. What I am wondering about is who chased those fellows away. Evidently we have friends at hand."

"Look!" cried Nora, pointing to the campfire as they rounded the rock behind which their camp was pitched.

"It's a man!" gasped Arline.

"Will wonders never cease? It is Mr. Belden!" cried Grace.

"Crazy Bill Belden!" Emma halted, the color rushing to her face, then she bounded forward to the campfire but Belden did not even look up. He was preparing to make coffee. "So you are the man who came to the rescue of Miss Thayer, are you?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout that. I just came in heah an' I reckons to make some coffee an' git on my way," replied the old prospector.

The girls greeted Bill effusively, to which he returned a brief, "How!" They told him he must not leave them that night, explaining that both Lieutenant Wingate and Captain Gray were strangely missing. Belden, however, appeared not to be greatly interested in the recital. They tried to induce him to let them prepare food for him, but the stubborn old fellow refused all attempts to please him, so, after putting Arline to bed, they stood about and watched him drink his coffee. When he finished, he turned the coffee pot upside down and banged it on a rock to empty it, wiped it out with his hand and stowed it in his kit.

"Now, Mr. Belden, if you will answer some questions you will do us a great service," said Miss Briggs. "What do you think has become of Mr. Gray and Mr. Wingate?"

"I reckons that the guerrillas has got 'em," replied the prospector.

"Who are the guerrillas?"

"Mexican bandits, smugglers, everything that's bad an'—"

"But why should they wish to interfere with us?" interrupted Emma.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout that."

"Was it the guerrillas that were here just now?" questioned Grace.

"I don't know, bein' as I didn't see 'em."

Grace asked him if he would do something for them. Belden grunted that it depended upon what they wished.

"We wish you to search for our missing men. You know these mountains and you know the men whom you call guerrillas," began Grace.

"I don't know nothin'," protested the old man.

"I am asking you, will you do it?" persisted Grace. "You helped us out to-night. I know it was you who drove those ruffians away. If you will stay here to-night I know they will trouble us no more; then to-morrow, if you will go out and try to find our men, we shall be under lifelong obligations to you. I don't offer you money because I do not believe you would take such an offer kindly. Will you do it, Mr. Belden?"

"I'll think 'bout it, Miss."

"Thank you. Girls, suppose we have some coffee and—"

"Something to eat," finished Stacy Brown, entering camp at this moment. "I've driven off the bandits and Lemuel is standing guard. Now that they know I am here I don't believe they will trouble you ladies any further to-night. Howdy, Bill. I reckon you'll be—"

"Girls!" cried Nora. There was a note in

her voice that attracted instant attention. "Here's something pinned to the flap of the boys' tent."

Emma ran to her. She peered and discovered a slip of paper fastened to the tent flap at about a level with the eyes, but instead of removing it, Emma waited until her companions had joined her.

Miss Briggs removed the pin and carried the paper to the light, and opened the folded sheet.

"Girls, here is another message for us," announced Elfreda. "Still another mystery to add to the already long list that have been coming our way. Shall I read it?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the girls.

"The man who wrote it may be all right, but I do wish he would get a pencil that would make a legible mark," averred Elfreda, peering at the faint writing, then beginning to read the following message:

"Overlanders: Guerrilla bunch plans to capture whole party. Can be foiled if you will follow directions. Break camp quietly and proceed due east until foothills are reached. From there proceed towards northwest until reach El Capitan Rock. Wait there until further orders. In breaking camp leave tents so it will look as if you were coming back. Take blankets

and chuck. Lose no time. Go at once or you will be too late. Friends are working for you. Go now! The girl got what she came for—information.

“ ‘WILLY.’ ”

“That message means business!” declared Grace Harlowe with emphasis. “Mr. Belden, do you know where El Capitan Rock is?” she demanded, turning to the prospector.

Bill Belden nodded without removing his pipe from his mouth.

“Then you are going to show us the way. Stacy, go get Lemuel and have him throw a light pack on the mule and saddle up the ponies for us, and be ready to move in ten minutes.” Grace gave her orders hurriedly.

Belden did not appear to be at all interested in the preparations for departure, but when they were ready to move he got up, yawned and removed the pipe from his mouth.

“You are going with us, aren’t you?” begged Emma anxiously.

Belden shook his head, whereupon there was a wail of protest from the Overland girls.

“I’ve got other things to do besides traipsin’ round with a bunch o’ gals. Foller the pass that you’ll find straight east from heah till you git into the foothills. Keep on till you finds an

open stretch; then head north till you reach the open plain. Thar you'll see a clump of rocks with a bigger one in the middle. That's El Capitan Rock and not El Capitan Mountain. Git to it soon as you can, an' stay there. Don't show yerselves nohow. There's water there. Don't be slow 'bout it neither. Git goin' an' keep goin'!"

"Yes, but what if the men who are missing should come here and find us gone?" protested Emma.

"Don't worry none 'bout them. Hustle!"

The Overland girls rode from camp not at all positive that they were doing the right thing, though they were convinced that Crazy Bill Belden knew more than he was willing to admit. The going was rough and none knew the way, and a few spills resulted, Arline suffering most from these. After making all speed possible for the better part of an hour, the party halted, having reached the eastern end of the pass, with the foothills just ahead.

A distant gun shot was heard far to the rear. It was followed by scattering fire that kept up for some time.

"Rifles!" exclaimed Miss Briggs.

"Yes," agreed Grace. "The attack on the camp has started, and my belief is that Mr. Belden is defending it. He has stayed there

for that very purpose. Some day we shall know who he is, but just now we can do no more than class him as one of the many mysteries that have enveloped us."

"Grace! Isn't that something moving yonder just beyond Stacy? Wha—at can it be?" whispered Emma Dean.

"I don't see anything but bushes stirring in the breeze," answered Grace, trying to pierce the early morning haze with her eager gaze. "You must be mistaken, dear. I—"

A darting tongue of light flashed forth from the bushes followed by the report of Stacy Brown's revolver, and a repressed yell.

"I got him. Look out for yourselves!" shouted Stacy.

CHAPTER XVII

ON A SECRET MISSION

“TOM GRAY, is it really you?” begged Lieutenant Hippy Wingate, after he and Bud had released the Overlander from his horse and assisted him to the ground.

“Yes. What is left of me. Have they gone?”

“I chased them off. They thought they were attacked by a bunch,” chuckled Bud. “You fellows must get out of here hot foot. They are likely to be sneaking back any minute. Take a horse apiece, and I’ll lead. Give them the rein, and they’ll follow me. Don’t talk out loud until I tell you it is safe to do so.”

“Tom, old man!” breathed Hippy, giving his companion’s hand a warm grip after Captain Gray had been assisted to the back of the Mexican pony to which he previously had been bound by his captors. “You can tell me about it later, but I’m sure glad to have you with me. Just one question. Are the girls all right?”

“They were when I left them. I don’t know what may have happened since.”

"Hustle!" urged Bud.

The little party moved on in silence, only the tread of the ponies and the creaking of leather relieving the quietness of their progress. Bud strode along in the lead for some time, then they detoured to the left and plunged into a deep pass. There they halted to permit the horses to drink.

"Are we headed for our camp?" questioned Tom anxiously.

"You are headed for *a* camp, but not for yours just yet," was the unexpected reply.

"Eh?" demanded Hippy. "I want to know where we are going?"

"You'll know when you get there," was the brief reply.

"It's your move, Buddy," answered Hippy after slight hesitation. "You have done us a big service and I willingly place myself in your hands, but we must get back to our folks as soon as possible. We are worried about them, old top."

"Forget it! From what I hear they can take care of themselves. There is one thing that I want to say: You are to ask no questions, and you are to keep to yourselves whatever you may hear or see so far as my affairs are concerned. Does it go?"

"It goes," answered Hippy. "Isn't it about

time we let Captain Gray tell what happened to him?"

"I know it already. He may tell you, if he wishes. I might say that when I went after my horse I came across the guerrillas who had him in tow and followed them as closely as I dared. When the guerrillas met up with you, you thought it was myself coming and you gave yourself away."

Hippy admitted the charge.

"Those fellows were taking the captain to the camp where you were being held when I found you. What they were going to do with you two I don't know. We should worry about that now. There is a man in their camp now trying to find out what their purpose was. We'll be going now."

The three men started on, Bud striding ahead at a rapid pace, and as they rode Tom told his companion as much of his own experience as he could recall. He had had a gun-battle with two men and was finally downed by a heavy blow, much in the same way that Hippy had been crippled. From then on until he found himself a prisoner in a hole in the ground, he remembered nothing. He was kept in the "dark hole," as he called it, until that very evening, when he was bound to the back of a mustang and began the rough ride that, due to Hippy

and Bud, had come to an abrupt ending.

The guide now turned into a narrow pass and, after proceeding through this for some distance, they came into a broad, rugged valley, and there Bud halted his charges, telling them to wait there until he returned. They heard him utter a shrill whistle, which, after a brief interval, was answered in kind. He then disappeared, the two Overlanders waiting anxiously and wondering what it was all about.

"Follow me!" ordered a voice close at hand, so close that it startled both men.

"You aren't Bud. Who are you?" demanded Captain Gray.

"It's all right. Bud is with the Chief. You are to come with me. Get down and leave your horses here."

"I'll try most anything once," returned Hippy good-naturedly, dismounting and tying his pony to a sapling. Tom did likewise, then turned and followed their guide. They soon discovered a campfire ahead. A small group of men were lounging about smoking their pipes, and just outside the circle of light silent figures were to be observed wrapped in blankets and apparently asleep.

"What are we up against?" whispered Tom.

"You may search me," answered Lieutenant Wingate.

"How are you, gentlemen?" greeted a pleasant youthful voice as a man stepped out of the shadows. "Captain Gray, I am glad to know you," he added, shaking hands with Tom, then doing the same with Hippy as he called the latter's name. "Sit down over here where we shall not be heard."

They followed him, amazed at the man's being able to call them by name while they were wholly unable to make out a single line of his features owing to the darkness. To be sure the stranger's broad-brimmed hat was pulled well down over his eyes and his chin was set firmly on his chest. His shoulders, they observed, were poised in such a way as to indicate strength, and a great deal of it.

"You fellows have had rather a rough time of it, eh?" he chuckled.

"We are pretty well used to it now," answered Hippy. "Where the Overland Riders go there ordinarily is excitement."

"So I understand," nodded the stranger. "Much of it could have been prevented had we not been otherwise engaged. I presume you are wondering where and why—"

"Yes. We are," agreed Tom. "In the first place, where are we and why are we kidnapped in this refined fashion? I'm not used to the method," he added laughingly.

"You are in a secret rendezvous of the Texas Rangers," replied the stranger in a half whisper, "and I am not deceiving you when I tell you that I know you could find your way here again without help. You are too good a forester not to be able to do that. I will say also that I have every confidence in you; otherwise you would not be here."

"Thanks for your confidence," murmured Hippy in a half chuckle.

"None of the men here, with possibly two exceptions, are aware of my reason for inviting you here to-night—bringing you here, I should say," corrected the Ranger. "That is immaterial at the moment. The border guerrillas have been unusually active of late and—"

"Then why not get after them?" interrupted Hippy. "Don't you know who they are?"

"Yes. We know some of them, and so do you gentlemen, but we do not yet know the reason for their activity. They seem to have broken out in several directions, kidnapping, raiding, robbing, attacking without apparent reason, and that is what bothers us. We could of course arrest the leaders we know, but what we are trying to find out is the motive for all this banditry. Once we know that we shan't have to look far for the remedy," concluded the Ranger grimly.

"Your voice sounds familiar. Haven't I met you before?" wondered Hippy.

"Possibly. It stands to reason that we can't successfully cover all this territory at one time. We have certain definite points to keep under constant observation and that is about the best we can do with our limited force."

"You wish to use our outfit? Is that it?" questioned Tom Gray.

"Yes. You are traveling through the mountains. You are both soldiers, experienced men, and the ladies of your party have nerve. Don't misunderstand me. I don't wish to mix them up in any affair of ours. At this time, however, your entire party, to a certain extent, is involved, for the guerrillas appear to have it in for you all. Gonzales, of course, has a special grievance against you folks, and so has Pat Proll, but back of it there is something more. You may, and probably will, have trouble with them right along, but we shall do the best we can to protect you. Beyond that you will have to go it on your own."

"We will do that all right," promised Lieutenant Wingate.

"Now what is it that you wish us to do for you?" asked Tom Gray.

"Go on into the Guadalupes. Keep your eyes open. Roam about and observe closely.

You will see a Mexican now and then. Find out if you can what he is up to, but don't let any of them know that you are watching. It might cause further trouble for your outfit. You can go hunting as an excuse. In an emergency one of you will have to ride to Post Number One, the location of which I will give you before you leave here. One blaze on a tree on the north side will mean that you have information for me. Two blazes on the south side of a tree will mean that you are facing an emergency. Use this process in case you should find no one at Post Number One to receive your messages. Four whistles with an interval between the third and fourth will be your signal, and the same with rifle or revolver shots. Leave a written message at Post Number One if you must, but be cautious."

"That's all right, but how are we going to find these bandits in that big mountain range?" questioned Tom Gray.

"It's like hunting bear up in the polar regions. You don't have to hunt the bear—he hunts you," answered the Ranger laughingly. "You are now commissioned deputy Rangers with full authority. I stand back of you in whatever you may see fit to do, knowing that you will always act with judgment. It probably will not be necessary for any of your party to

know of your connection with us, but do as you think best about informing them."

"Yes. How about our outfit? We want to get back to our camp before daylight if possible," urged Tom.

"Your camp has been stalked by guerrillas all the evening, and probably is being attacked at this moment," announced the Ranger.

"What!" Hippy and Tom sprang up.

"Don't get excited. Your folks aren't there. They are well on their way to another camping place, and the old place is being occupied by a fellow who will give the guerrillas a real surprise. I will see that you are guided to the new place shortly. In the meantime have a snack with me." The Ranger clapped his hands. "A snack!" he said in answer to the reply to his hail. Coffee and biscuit were brought in a few moments, and while the three men were eating they discussed the work that Tom and Hippy were to do for the Texas Rangers.

"Horses are ready," finally announced their host. "One of them is the pony belonging to the Mexicans who captured you two men. It is probably a stolen animal, but when you get through with him just turn him loose and he will find his way to his owner. The guide who shows you to your camp will lead back our mustang—"

A Ranger approaching at a brisk stride, interrupted the conversation, Hippy and Tom regarding him curiously, for the man plainly was in haste.

"Well? What is it, Cale?" demanded their commanding officer as the man halted, raising his hand to his hat brim.

"The lookout just got a flash that that Overland party is mixin' it up with the Greasers!" announced the newcomer, an announcement that brought Tom and Hippy to their feet on the instant.

"Yes. I know," nodded the Ranger officer. "They aren't in that camp, Cale. The Overland party left there some time ago. If there is someone there, you know who it may be."

"Yes, I know, Cap, but this ain't at the camp. The flash says that the bunch of women got ambushed by the Greasers at the mouth of Two-mile Pass while they was hikin' for another camp."

"Flash the alarm and send all the men you can spare from here. I can't go. Captain Gray, you and Lieutenant Wingate of course will go, but you will have to ride some. This man will be in command, and you will obey his orders. Let's go! Here's your credentials," he whispered, pressing a folded paper into Tom Gray's hand.

The two Overland men were in their saddles almost as soon as the quick-acting Rangers had hit their own leather, and as the party galloped from the hidden camp the Overland men observed a tiny light twinkling from the mountain-top in the rear of the camp. At first they thought it was a star, but a second quick glance told their eyes, experienced in reading signals in war-time, that a far-flung message was being sent in little dots and dashes, picked up, no doubt, by keen Ranger eyes from other prominent points in that section. Had they but known of the efficiency of this border legion, they would have realized that even then men were riding hard on their way to the assistance of the girls of the Overland party. Whether or not they could reach the scene in time was problematical even to the Rangers.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AMBUSH

“FOR goodness’ sake, back up!” begged Elfreda Briggs, who was well in the lead with Stacy at the time the latter fired his revolver.

“Yes, ride back a few rods,” urged Grace. “Be lively!”

The reason for this move was that Miss Briggs was positive that she had seen several figures ahead near the mouth of the pass to the eastward. The Overlanders had been following it from its westerly end as directed by Crazy Bill Belden. The others of the party now quickly wheeled their ponies about and retreated a short distance to a spot where the shadows were deeper and the opportunities for hiding greater. Only one shot had been fired, but the silence following it was more oppressive to the girls than would have been a volley of rifle fire.

“Wouldn’t it be better for us to keep going on the back trail? We know there are prowlers to the eastward,” suggested Elfreda.

"No. I have another idea about this affair," answered Grace. "We will dismount, take our rifles with us, and keep close together, at a distance from our horses. That is my advice. We shall have to meet emergencies as they arise."

"Some one ought to find out what we are up against," declared Miss Briggs. "I don't mind doing it myself, as I, for one, want to know who those mysterious figures we saw, are."

"No, no," protested the girls.

"Missie, Ah'll do it," offered Lemuel.

"That is splendid of you," complimented Emma. "It doesn't seem fair, though. You might be caught again and get another bump on your head."

"Dat's all right, Missie. Ah's black an' dey can't see me in de dark. Ah's got mah club, too, an' Ah wants ter hit er haid wid it—Ah wants ter hit hard, too."

"Go on, but be careful," directed Grace. "We can't afford to lose you, Lemuel."

The girls dismounted, led their ponies quietly to one side and tethered them, following which the Overlanders crept cautiously after Lemuel, who had promptly started to reconnoiter. Stacy Brown led the party in its advance, he having been strictly forbidden to use his weapons unless shot at. That opportunity came ere they had proceeded very far.

A sudden flash shot out in the darkness ahead, but the report was not preceded by the whine of a bullet, so the Overlanders did not believe it had been fired in their direction. Stacy, however, let go at the flash, but no answering shot followed.

"Back up!" ordered Grace. "We are in for trouble. Poor Lemuel. I believe that shot was fired at him, and if—"

"Doan' shoot," called an anxious voice. "It's Lem. Whar you-all?"

"Here, here! Right here," answered Emma. "Hurry and tell us what you discovered."

"Ah hit er feller ovah the haid," announced the colored boy proudly. "Ah hit him like Ah was hit t'other time, Ah did. Den another feller shot at me, but Ah wasn't whar de bullet went nohow. What you-all reckons dey's goin' ter do ter you-all?"

"Tell me what you discovered," ordered Grace, giving the boy a shake. "How many men did you see?"

"Ah seen er lot of 'em. Dey's all 'round dar waitin' fer something, Ah doan' know what. Dey seen me an' I reckoned it war time fer me ter git out when dat feller shot at me. You-all got ter shoot back. Dat's what you got ter do; den dey'll know dey's folks heah who kin shoot. Den you got ter hide yerselves."

"How are we going to know where to shoot if we can't see anything to shoot at?" wondered Miss Briggs.

"Jest plug away, dat's all," advised Lemuel.

"All right. Here goes," cried Stacy, and before they could stop him he was firing his rifle into the bushes ahead and to either side of the pass until the pass echoed to the rolling reports of his weapon.

"Stop it!" cried Miss Briggs as she sprang forward and grabbed the fat boy's arm.

To the amazement of the Overland Riders, not a shot was fired in return.

"They have gone!" cried Nora joyously.

"No, I don't believe it," answered Grace. "That, apparently, is what they wish us to believe so that we may proceed eastward and walk into their trap. Part of Lemuel's advice is good, however. We must secrete ourselves. The only alternative is to return towards our deserted camp, which I do not believe would be a bit safer."

"Let's do *something*," urged Miss Briggs. "Sooner or later they are going to rush us. That probably will separate us, and then, Heaven only knows what will happen."

"That may be exactly what they are planning to do when they think we are off our guard," spoke up Emma.

"Oh, let's run," begged Arline tremulously, her teeth chattering audibly. "Let's go back the way we came. If I stay here much longer I shall die."

"Listen, girls," said Grace, who had been pondering over their problem. "I think our best plan would be to climb up the side of the pass, which we can easily do, but we must first find out if the way is clear. Lemuel, you go up one side and Mr. Brown will go up the other and investigate. Stacy, leave your rifle here. It will be in your way in climbing, and further, I don't dare trust you with it. Make all possible haste. I am going to investigate farther back in the pass towards camp and see what I can discover in that direction. You girls keep a sharp lookout the other way, but for goodness' sake keep down so you don't get hit in case anything is started." After a further caution to Stacy and a word of warning to Lemuel the three set out on their mission, leaving four anxious Overland girls awaiting their return.

Grace was the first to return after a short absence. Lemuel came running in a few moments later.

"Ah seen two fellers up thar. Dey-all seen me, too, but dey didn't shoot. Why dat?" he panted.

"Probably because they do not wish us to

know they are there," suggested Elfreda Briggs. "Here comes Stacy. Well? What news?"

"All clear on the south side of the pass. I'll stake my reputation on that."

"Your what?" questioned Emma, but no one laughed. The Overlanders were not in a laughing mood at that critical moment.

"We will try it," announced Grace. "Everybody keep quiet and hope for the best." After a moment's silent listening the girls started cautiously for the south side of the pass, which they gained in a few moments, and, led by Stacy and Lemuel, began climbing up the mountainside. The slope was steep, but not smooth, making climbing comparatively easy, but necessitating the utmost care that no fragments of rock were dislodged. Now and then they would pause to listen.

The party had progressed about fifty feet upward in a direct line when Lemuel came wriggling back to them.

"What is it?" whispered Miss Briggs.

"Dey's er man up dar. Ah seen him agin de sky, an' he's lookin' down inter de pass. Whar we go now, Ah wants ter know?"

Elfreda passed the word to Grace who communicated it to her companions just as Stacy joined them. He, too, had discovered that they

were not alone on that side of the pass which he previously had pronounced safe.

"Work cautiously to the left," whispered Grace. "There may be only one man there, and if so he may go down soon." She did not explain by what process of reasoning she had arrived at that conclusion, but began edging her way along to the left, followed by her companions, Arline making many slips.

"I can't go any farther," finally gasped Miss Thayer. "I fear I am going to faint."

"Grace says come on. She has found a hiding place for us," Elfreda informed her. "Come slowly, and for goodness' sake buck up."

The "hiding place" they found to be a depression in the side of the mountain, protected by a shelf of rock that extended out over it, forming a roof. The approaches on either side were rather smooth, but the girls reached the haven without mishap and sank down uttering sighs of relief.

"Now, girls," whispered Grace, "not a loud word is to be spoken nor a shot fired to reveal our position. I believe we shall be safe here until morning, and even then we may be able to keep out of sight by lying flat on the rock. Now we'll see what happens—"

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Nora.

Some one was speaking; then several voices

were heard. At first the little Overland party were at a loss to understand where the sounds came from, then suddenly realized that the speakers were directly over them, probably standing on the very rock-roof that sheltered their hiding place.

"We are surrounded on all sides," whispered Grace. "Not a move, not a word above a whisper or we shall be lost! Oh!"

A crashing volley was fired somewhere to the westward of them on the trail that they had followed in their flight. They could see the flashes, and immediately below them in the pass they could hear men running through the bushes and scrambling up the mountainside in frantic efforts to escape.

"Ah reckons Ah's gwine lose dat fool mule," observed St. Petersburg Johnson anxiously.

"Hark! Listen to that, will you? What does it mean?" wondered Emma.

A score of rifles to the westward boomed out in a crashing volley, apparently in answer to the first shots the Overland girls had heard. The shots were followed by shouts. Then men came down the pass towards their hiding place, some on horses, some on foot, while behind them rifles were hastening their flight.

CHAPTER XIX

RANGERS TAKE A HAND

THE thuds of a larger body of galloping horses were now heard approaching by the Overlanders. These riders were plainly in pursuit of the fleeing men who were rushing through the pass, the pursuers firing continuously as they came on at a furious pace.

All at once the hoof-beats and the firing of the pursuers ceased, and sudden silence settled over the dark valley.

"Wha—at does it mean?" whispered Nora Wingate.

"A party has come down the pass and attacked the men who were trying to ambush us, I should say," replied Elfreda Briggs.

"Sh-h-h! Not so loud," warned Emma. "The men over us might hear."

Grace said she believed that those men on the rock above them had gone away, too. For some moments after that no sound was heard from any direction; then the silence was suddenly broken by the long-drawn bray of Lemuel's

mule. Following that almost instantly a rifle was fired immediately below the watchers, and from either side of the pass flashes were seen, followed by booming reports within a few yards of the Overland position.

The girls instantly threw themselves down as a bullet *pinged* against the rock behind them.

"Help! I'm hit!" cried Arline.

"Be quiet!" commanded Elfreda, springing up, regardless of the peril that she was inviting, and dragging Arline as far back into the depression as possible. Grace assisted in placing the girl where they could give her attention.

"Where are you hurt?" demanded Grace.

"In my leg," Arline was moaning.

"Grace, I must have a light. Cover it with your skirt just for a moment, and I will see if she really has been hit," directed Miss Briggs.

The Overland girl's skirt having been adjusted to shut in the light, Elfreda examined the injured leg. Her examination was completed in a moment.

"All right," she announced, snapping off the light and uncovering her head.

"Is it bad?" questioned Grace.

"It is not a bullet wound at all, but the flesh has been punctured. I think a bullet must have snipped off a piece of rock, which must have

hit her. The wound is of no consequence at all, but it should be dressed. That we cannot do until we can get my kit. Arline, buck up. You are all right. Lie right where you are."

The girls breathed sighs of relief. During all this time down in the pass the firing had continued unceasingly but the shooting now became scattering. The watchers observed, too, that the combatants had worked eastward well down towards the mouth of the pass, so that the girls were now able to stand up without courting death.

"They've got 'em on the run," cried Stacy.

"Who has who on the run?" demanded Emma, but Stacy couldn't even guess. The others now found time to wonder who it was that had come to their rescue. As yet they dared make no sign to indicate where they were, not knowing whether it were friend or foe that had driven out their attackers.

Another and smaller group of horsemen galloped down the pass at this juncture, and a shrill whistle from one of them was answered from somewhere on the opposite side of the pass. A bird call farther to the east followed closely after the whistles.

"What does it all mean?" wondered Nora.

"Just another mystery, that's all," averred Elfreda Briggs.

“Hark!” cried Grace.

“O-v-e-r-l-a-n-d!” came the familiar long-drawn cry.

“Hippy!” screamed Nora. “Here! Here, up on the side of the mountain. It’s Hippy! We’re saved, girls! We’re saved! Hurry, let’s go.”

“Wait!” cautioned Miss Briggs.

Someone began scrambling up towards them. The girls could hear him coming, but failed to make out who it was in the darkness.

“Who are you?” demanded Emma. “Speak or we’ll shoot.”

“It’s Tom,” answered a strained voice. “Are you all there?”

“Yes. All here, and safe and sound, Tom,” answered Grace. “You came just in time.”

“No, I didn’t,” replied Tom as he scrambled to their perch. “We were a long way from here when the word came that you girls were in trouble. A bunch of Texas Rangers got here ahead of our party of Rangers. You may thank them for saving you. We heard the shooting some time before we got here, and feared the worst. The Rangers are pursuing that bunch of ruffians now. I hope they kill them all,” added Tom savagely. “We found two dead ones. Did you girls hit anyone?”

Grace said no.

"The Rangers wish you to get out of the pass as soon as possible. They want to clean up that bunch, and to be free to shoot at anyone they see, which they can't do while they know you are here. They want you out of the way before daylight. The trouble is not yet over."

"Perhaps those Ranger men think we are staying here because we are enamored of the scenery," observed Emma Dean.

"Let's go," urged Elfreda.

The girls began scrambling down the mountainside at once, Arline assisted by Tom. Hippy and another man sat their ponies awaiting them.

"Where are your horses?" demanded Lieutenant Wingate. "Get to them and let's get out of this. We can talk afterward. This gentleman is going to pilot us to a safe place," he said, nodding to a man near him.

Lemuel and Stacy led the way to their ponies, which were found unharmed and browsing in perfect contentment. It took but a few moments to get the party under way, led by a silent rider who had not yet spoken. Not a human being did they see on their way out, but their progress was not unobserved. Watchful guarding eyes noted their every movement as they passed out through the mouth of the pass.

They had progressed about half a mile from the pass and entered a stretch of open country at the base of the foothills, just as day began to dawn. The guide struck off at a gallop after a searching look at the gray mountains. He saw something.

"Ride!" he shouted. "Spread out and ride. Come on, you fellow with the mule!"

The words had barely passed his lips when bullets began to whistle overhead, followed by the boom of rifles somewhere to the left.

The guide's horse went down and the animal rolled over on its side and lay still.

"Go on!" he yelled as the Overlanders pulled their ponies down.

"We won't leave you here," flung back Lieutenant Wingate. "Come up here with me! Don't be a fool."

The Ranger sprang on Hippy's horse, which now took the lead, and the outfit rode off at top speed. For a few moments bullets continued to sing over them; then a new note sounded in the mountains, the sound of other guns. It was plain to their experienced ears that the ruffians who had been shooting at them were now engaged with other opponents.

"The Rangers have them now," cried Hippy encouragingly, as they galloped into a sandy stretch.

CHAPTER XX

A SURPRISE AT EL CAPITAN

A STEADY pace was maintained for the next hour, which took the Overland party and their guide a long distance from the scene of the ambush that had been laid for them.

"Where is this place we are headed for?" questioned Hippy, turning to the Ranger.

"Headed fer the rocks dead ahead. The highest rock you see there is the El Capitan Rock. Some difference between that and El Capitan Mountain, eh?"

"You're right. Say, Buddy, what have those guerrillas got against us that they would try to shoot up the girls of this outfit?" questioned Lieutenant Wingate.

"That's what the Chief wants to find out, and when he does there'll be some dead Greasers 'long this border."

"Was it the Chief that I was talking with last night?"

"Pardner, if he'd wanted you to know who he is he'd have told you, don't you reckon?"

"I reckon," agreed Hippy, taking the rebuke good-naturedly. "I hope he and I meet again one of these days."

"You're doin' something for him, ain't you?"

"Pardner, if he'd wanted you to know, he would have told you, wouldn't he?" came back Hippy, whereat the Ranger behind him coughed, then uttered a "ha-ha" that was heard by every member of the Overland party.

Shortly after that they were picking their way in among the rocks that rose out of a thick growth of mesquite, as rugged and cheerless a scene as the Overland Riders ever had looked upon. The Ranger and Hippy continued on through the tangle, the former apparently knowing his way.

"Here's the place," he announced as they rounded El Capitan Rock itself and found themselves in an open space, set in a frame of mesquite and misshapen rocks.

"What's that?" demanded Hippy, reining in his pony. "What's that stuff yonder?"

"Our tents!" cried Grace in amazement. "How in the world did our equipment get here? Elfreda, what do you think of that?"

"Nothing—nothing at all. I have ceased trying to solve mysteries. It is too great a tax for my head."

"That is why we let Stacy Brown do our solving," spoke up Emma. "Mr. Ranger, perhaps you can tell us how our equipment has transported itself here," she said, turning to the guide.

The Ranger shook his head.

"You folks will stay here to-night," he said. "Don't break camp till after ten o'clock to-night. At ten look due south to the top of the peak you see up there. If it's all right for you to go on you'll get a three-flash signal from a fellow. If you don't see the flash don't move. That's all."

"What kind of a signal is a three-flash signal?" wondered Stacy.

"Three winks from a flashlight, young feller," answered the Ranger. Declining a cordial invitation to stay and have breakfast with them, he abruptly set off on foot. Hippy called to him to take the Mexican pony, but the Ranger told him to use the animal to carry their equipment into the Guadalupe, and then set the beast adrift.

The Overlanders were still talking about the recovery of their equipment, but no theory seemed to fit its mysterious appearance at their new camp site. The stuff, however, was in a jumble, and amid much good-natured grumbling they began straightening it out, first giv-

ing attention to their stores of food, which were found intact. So far as they were able to discover, not a single thing was missing.

"I want food," demanded Hippy. "The rest of the work can wait. Is there water to be had in this hotel?"

"Yes, sah," answered Lemuel. "Dey's er spring right obah dar. Ah gwine water dat fool mule right smart, sah, den—"

"You get water for breakfast first, young man. Water the mule afterwards. You don't think we want to drink after a mule, do you?" demanded Hippy.

While the other girls were getting breakfast, Elfreda further examined Arline's injured leg and found it somewhat swollen. She dressed the wound, and by the time breakfast was served on a blanket laid on a slab of rock, Arline's nerves had so far settled down that she was able to laugh at one of Hippy's witticisms. During breakfast experiences were exchanged, Hippy and Tom telling the story of their capture and rescue, the girls in turn narrating the story of their flight following a mysterious message from "Willy," and the resulting ambush in Two-mile Pass.

In view of the fact that they expected to move on that night, only one tent was erected, so that the girls might have a chance to rest.

Then they assorted and lashed such of their equipment as would not be needed that day.

It was late afternoon when Tom Gray awakened and smiled up at the faithful colored boy, who, perched on a point of vantage, was keeping guard over the camp. Lemuel responded to the smile by showing his gleaming teeth and the whites of his eyes, whereupon Tom Gray threw an arm over his head and again went to sleep.

Night was upon them when the camp was awakened by "Let's go!" from Elfreda Briggs who had gotten up and prepared supper. No second invitation was needed, once the odors of coffee and bacon were inhaled by the Overlanders. They sprang up rubbing the sleep from their eyes and started for the spring and a refreshing wash.

Lemuel had built a fire, for the air was chill.

"You have been very sweet to me, Elfreda dear," breathed Arline, placing an arm about Miss Briggs.

"All persons who breathe in harmony are sweet," vouchsafed Emma. "Don't you see what a difference it makes, Arline? Were it not that I breathe in harmony and that all things are beautiful to me, I should say that your hair is a fright," added Emma amid laughter.

"I can't help it, girls," answered Arline, flushing. "Last night's experiences put a permanent wave in this head of hair of mine such as no beauty specialist ever dreamed of. It will last more than six months, too."

"Good for you, Arline!" shouted Nora. "Now you are a real human being."

"Look out!" It was Lemuel's voice that uttered the warning. He came bounding in from the ponies where he had gone to see that they were properly saddled for the night journey before them. "Ah seen'er bunch of fellers foolin' wid de hosses, an'— Dar dey come!"

A group of horsemen rode boldly into camp, but, to the relief of the amazed Overlanders, there were no Mexicans among them. Leading the party rode a stern-faced man who looked as though he might be a rancher, while just behind him there was a white man that the Overland Riders instantly recognized. It was Pat Proll, who once before had called on them in the assumed guise of a Texas Ranger, and whom Crazy Bill Belden had declared was only a cheap deputy sheriff and a crook.

Cowpunchers in chaps, riding lean mustangs, backed up the two men and came to a halt just within the light of the campfire. The Overland Riders were on their feet at the instant they heard Lemuel's warning shout, and those of

them who had their revolvers handy, were ready to defend themselves, with the exception of Emma and Stacy who had quickly dodged out of sight.

"Well, sir? What is it?" demanded Tom Gray. "It is customary to hail before entering a camp. That is common courtesy in this part of the country."

"This ain't no society call, Mister. This is business," replied the leader sternly. "This is a posse. Thar was a raid on my ranch last night and we reckon there is somebody here who knows something about it. While you don't look to be the kind of critters we expected to find, I reckon we've got the goods on you. Now I'll give you a fair chance. What have you got to say for yourselves?"

"About what?" countered Tom. "We are the Overland Riders, some of us with our wives taking our regular summer's vacation in the saddle, and we do not care about being interfered with in this manner. What is it that you want to know?"

"I'm Bill Jennings. Thar was a raid on my ranch last night and some stock stolen. I ask you what you got to say about that?"

"Nothing! We have had our own troubles with raids, and further, I don't like your insinuation. We know nothing about the raid

on your ranch, and if that's all you have to say we want you to leave here."

Pat Proll rode a little forward.

"As Bill Jennings said, thar was a raid on his ranch last night; and that roan mustang you've got there is one of the animals you stole. We've got the goods on you, and you're under arrest, the whole bunch of you."

"Where's your warrant, Proll?" drawled Lieutenant Wingate.

"This here's my warrant," shouted the deputy sheriff, whipping out his revolver.

"We have the same sort of warrant," said Tom quietly, stepping forward.

"Stop it!" came a voice suddenly. "Keep your hands away from your weapons or you'll be in trouble. We have rifles trained on you, and the first posseite who makes a move to shoot is going to get drilled." The speaker could not be seen for the mesquite, but Tom and Hippy recognized Stacy's voice, and could scarcely suppress a smile. Proll, however, who had his revolver pointed at Lieutenant Wingate, quickly dropped the weapon.

"Mr. Jennings," said Tom gravely, "you look like an honest man, but you are in bad company. This man Proll is, I fear, a crook."

Proll once more reached for his revolver, but at sight of Stacy Brown and Emma Dean,

who now raised their heads above the mesquite bushes, and their rifles aimed steadily at him, he once more dropped his hands.

"Maybe," observed Jennings, not soothing Proll's feelings by the remark. "Just the same, I see my pony here."

"If you'll step aside with me, Mr. Jennings, I think I can convince you of our integrity," said Tom quietly.

The rancher hesitated, then dismounted.

"All right, young fellow. But don't try any tricks. I have a legal posse with me."

Tom did not reply to this, but asked Grace to lend him her pocket flashlight, then stepped to where no one could hear what should be said, followed by the rancher. He then turned.

"Mr. Jennings, as has been said, you look like an honest man, and I ask you to keep silence as to what I say to you and show you."

"Very well, if you can convince me that you're as honest as you say I look," was the reply.

Tom Gray took this as a promise and thrust a paper into the hands of the rancher, directing a ray from the flashlight on it.

As he read the paper, Jennings' face became a study. What he read was a commission from the Governor of the State, executed in blank and filled out by the chief Ranger, appointing

Captain Tom Gray and Lieutenant Theophilus Wingate deputy Rangers for the State of Texas. Jennings read the paper through twice, then looked up and said harshly:

"You fool, why didn't you tell me this at first? I might have shot you!"

"Who'd have been the fool then?" asked Tom.

"I reckon I'd have been," was the admission.

"Not a word to give Proll a clue, please," warned Tom, as the two went back to the party.

"It's all right, Pat," said Jennings to Proll. "Captain Gray has explained things."

"You're easy, Bill!" was the sneering response.

"Maybe. But we'll take my pony and go."

During the rest of the evening the Overlanders sat about the fire waiting for the hour when they should receive the three-flash signal from the south. Ten o'clock came and passed. Half-past ten came, and Grace had just remarked that they might as well go to bed when Nora exclaimed:

"Not yet! Look yonder!"

Three tiny specks of light showed and died away, showed again and disappeared. Tom, with Grace's flashlight, returned the signal, whereupon the light on the mountain winked twice and was seen no more.

CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

INSTANTLY all was activity, and in half an hour camp was broken and the campers were on their way to a part of the Guadalupe which the chief Ranger had suggested to Tom as worth investigating.

They traveled all night with only a brief rest for their mounts. At dawn they stopped for breakfast, then resumed their journey.

"It seems to me that we're in a most unnecessary hurry," complained Arline.

"In a hurry, but not unnecessarily, Arline," Tom said. "We can't afford to take chances here. Look sharp for fresh trails of horses and of men—everybody. Lemuel, here's where you can use those big eyes of yours."

"Ah's a been doin' dat, Cap'n. Ah seen one trail to-day."

"You did?" chorused the Overlanders.

"Yes-sah. It wuz a bear trail."

"It isn't bear trails we're looking for, Lemuel," said Elfreda gravely, though the corners of her mouth twitched. "But keep on the look-

out. You saw more than the rest of us did, for we saw no bear trail."

It was rough going all that day, but about sunset camp was made.

"We'll stay here for a few days, and I'll do some real surveying work," announced Tom, while they were eating their evening meal.

The next morning Tom took his instruments and went out to do some work for the Forestry Department and also to see what signs, if any, he could find of guerrilla warfare.

Lemuel took up the quest for "trails," and kept at the work until the day grew late. About to return to camp, he uttered an exclamation and dropped to his hands and knees. After a moment he sprang to his feet and ran forward like a hound with its nose to a trail.

"Ah reckons Ah has gone fur enough," he finally decided, puzzled as to what he ought to do. "Ah knows what Ah'll do! Ah'll go fer Missie Grace or de Cap'n!"

Turning back, he ran swiftly. He came upon Tom first. Halting abruptly, he cried:

"Ah's made a 'scovery, Cap'n!"

"What have you discovered, Lemuel?" asked Tom, not much impressed.

"Ah's 'scovered a trail, Ah have!"

"Here come Miss Briggs and Lieutenant Wingate. Tell them about it."

"Ah can't tell no more'n I have. I'll show you-all."

Elfreda and Hippy approached, and Tom said:

"Lemuel has found some more bear tracks."

"No-sah, dese ain't bear tracks. Dey's mule tracks. Come and see," and he set off at a swift trot. "See dose? Three mules done gone ovah dis trail, and dey ain't come back."

"They are mule tracks, and the animals were carrying heavy loads, too!" exclaimed Hippy.

"Hadn't we better follow the trail?" questioned Elfreda. But it was too dark to follow a trail effectively, so the party turned back to camp to await daylight, much to Lemuel's disappointment and disapproval.

Grace, Elfreda, Hippy and Lemuel set out as an investigating party the next morning, leaving Nora and Emma and Arline to look after the camp in their absence. Tom had surveying work that needed immediate attention.

When the investigating party reached the trail Lemuel shouted excitedly:

"Look dar! De mules done come back!"

"As sure as you're born, St. Petersburg, you're right!" cried Hippy. "We'll get at something now if we don't fumble matters!"

"Ain't de same mules dis time; sure ain't," declared the boy after a more careful scrutiny.

of the new trail. "Two trails. Wha's dat mean? One goes in widout comin' out and de udder comes out widout goin' in. Humph!"

"We'll follow and find out," announced Grace.

"There's danger, Grace. I don't like to have you and Elfreda run risks. You'd better return to the camp," said Hippy.

"When did Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders ever refuse to face risks, Hippy?" laughed Elfreda Briggs.

"Never!" answered Grace before Hippy could speak. "Come." So the march along the two trails was started, to halt about a mile further on at a spot surrounded by rocks, mesquite and a jungle of mountain growths.

"The mules stopped here for a roll," observed Grace, pointing to a spot where the bushes had been laid flat.

"Both mule parties came to this point with heavy loads, remained here for a time, then returned without their loads, I'll venture to say," said Lieutenant Wingate.

"Nor are these the only trails that lead to this spot," said Elfreda. "See those leading to the east?"

"But they all focus here," added Grace.

While the girls and Hippy talked things over, Lemuel went along one of the newly discovered

trails. He returned soon with a strip of pine four inches wide by two feet long. On it were printed the letters "U. M. C. C."

"Union Metallic Cartridge Company!" shouted Hippy. "Black boy, where did you get this?"

"Hippy, I think we'd better send Lemuel for Tom," suggested Grace.

"You're right, Loyalheart. As soon as St. Petersburg shows me where he got this board he'd better start back for Captain Gray."

"The Rangers had good reasons for asking us to come into the Guadalupe," said Tom, when late that afternoon Lemuel brought him to the spot, where the others had been making a further search, and Hippy showed him the board with "U. M. C. C." on it. "We'll stand watch here to-night. Girls, don't you think you'd better go back to the camp?"

"Why?"

"For one thing, either you, Grace, or Elfreda had better be in charge there if the camp itself should be endangered."

It was Grace who finally returned to the other girls while Elfreda remained to watch with the boys, all concealed behind bushes. Lemuel crept away to reconnoitre. It was two o'clock in the morning when he crept back and whispered to Hippy:

"Dey's comin'! Ah seen 'em!"

In a short time two horsemen rode into the clearing the Overland Riders were watching. One of the pair gave a low whistle and a train of five loaded mules appeared and came to a halt in the open space. Besides the mule drivers, there were three other men. Sentries were posted and the unloading began.

"Mexicans," thought Tom; "and guerrillas, I guess, for those cases look as though they contained rifles and ammunition."

The watchers heard a grating sound, but could see very little in the darkness.

After a while the mule train was driven away and the two horsemen followed, but the sentries were left behind. The hours seemed long to the cramped watchers, and it was with relief that they saw the sentries draw in at dawn, each smoke a cigarette, then leave the place.

"What do you know about this!" cried Hippy after the Overlanders had come out into the clearing. "I saw those fellows unload some cases, presumably rifles. You saw the same thing. Yet there is absolutely nothing here!" and Hippy sank down on a large rock.

"Does it occur to you that you may be sitting on the evidence?" asked Elfreda sweetly.

"Huh? Elfreda, you're a genius!" and Hippy sprang to his feet.

Lemuel was sent to search for a stake strong enough to use as a crowbar, and the stone on which Hippy had seated himself was finally pried from its place. There in a cavelike place many cases and boxes were piled up. Excitement ran high, but caution came uppermost and the stone at the opening of the cave was put again in place and the surroundings made to look as they were before.

"We must notify the Rangers," decided Tom. "We'll go back to the camp now, then to-night we can flash our prearranged signals on the chance that some Ranger may see them."

Back in the camp, all settled themselves to wait impatiently. As soon as darkness dropped down Tom began sending flash signals. It was late in the evening when his signals were answered.

"I got them," announced Tom. "But it will be to-morrow before any Ranger reaches here."

Just then a Mexican girl dashed breathlessly into the camp and panted:

"The guerrillas are coming! You must leave quickly!"

"That's the girl who dragged me out of camp that night!" exclaimed Arline.

"Juana!" cried the other girls in chorus.

"What's this? A trick?" demanded Tom.

"No, no! You must go!"

"Why do you come to warn us?" asked Grace.

"You have seen what you should not have seen. It was reported to Hernandez—"

"Who is he?" asked Elfreda.

"He is the captain of the guerrillas. He is my uncle, and I hate him! I displease him and he strikes me with his spur. Oh, I hate him! I would be revenged!"

A revolver shot sounded and Juana plunged to the ground. Tom picked her up and ran to the shelter of some rocks, where Elfreda took charge of her to see how seriously she was wounded just as rifle bullets began to whistle over the camp. The Overlanders sprang to the protection of their position, and a sharp battle took place in the darkness.

Rat-tat, tat, tat, tat! A new sound was added to the din.

"A machine gun!" cried Tom Gray.

The fire of the guerrillas was turned from the camp toward the new sound.

"The Rangers have come to our help!"

So it was. The firing became spasmodic, then ceased. The guerrillas were captured or run off. But this the Overlanders could only guess at until they heard a call:

"All right, Overlanders!"

"It's Mr. McKay!" exclaimed Tom.

"Right! Willy McKay, Captain of the Texas Rangers," was the reply as the man rode forward.

"Are you the 'Willy' who's been writing us those warning letters?" demanded Stacy.

"I'm the fellow. But you needn't worry now. We've bagged the gang of guerrillas, shot some of them, and have their leader."

"Come into the camp, Mr. McKay," invited Grace. "We'll have a bite to eat and you and Lieutenant Wingate and my husband can talk things over."

To this McKay readily agreed. He was delighted at the help Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders had given the authorities in breaking up the dangerous guerrilla gang, and gave high praise to all of them.

"We thought the elegant Gonzales was the brains of this movement, but you people have convinced me that he is the active lieutenant of Hernandez. I'll sleep here to-night, and to-morrow will put a guard over the plunder with Crazy Bill in charge."

"Crazy Bill! Is he one of your bunch?"

"Yes; and one of the best," laughed McKay.

Juana was not seriously hurt, and with her help those of the gang who had not escaped over the border were finally convicted and put in prison.

Several peaceful weeks went by, with Tom Gray busy with his surveying.

"Arline, you yearned for *life*. You've had it. How do you like it? Have you breathed in harmony with it?" asked Emma one day.

"Emma," put in Grace, "Arline and I have a confession to make. Because of the hobbies you ride, I thought it would be sport to offer you one, and Arline came to my aid. We read up on 'breathing in harmony.' Somehow, it didn't work out well, for you knew more about 'breathing in harmony' than we did."

"I found that out early, so when we were in New Orleans I went to the library and read it up myself. I'm sorry, though, that I've made life so miserable for Arline," chuckled Emma in reply.

Every one laughed, then Grace called:

"Come, everybody! Every one to work!"

So camp was broken, and the Overland Riders turned their faces eastward. They left Lemuel St. Petersburg Johnson the happiest boy in the Guadalupe because of the handsome purse they gave him before starting for home.

The further adventures of Grace Harlowe and her friends will be told in another volume, entitled, GRACE HARLOWE'S OVERLAND RIDERS ON THE LOST RIVER TRAIL.

THE END

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